

A woman with blonde hair styled in an updo, wearing a vibrant red, off-the-shoulder gown with a full skirt and a light-colored shawl draped over her left arm. She is standing in a lush green field filled with pink and yellow wildflowers. The background is a soft-focus landscape with a bright, hazy sky.

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KATE
NOBLE

Can two lifelong enemies
learn to rub each other
the right way?

A
MADNESS
in SPRING

a novella

A MADNESS IN SPRING

KATE NOBLE

The line between love and hate ...

Belinda Leonard prefers things done a certain way, and has her life – and the entire village of Hemshawe – arranged to her liking. The only thorn in her side is the maddening presence of Adam Sturridge, who has delighted in disrupting Belinda's perfectly ordered existence ever since they were children. But even though they are long past the age of pulling pigtails, Belinda and Adam cannot help but spark against each other every chance they get.

...is about to get blurry.

But when those sparks get noticed by a would-be matchmaker, things get turned on their head for Belinda and Adam. A few well-placed words have the pair questioning how they truly feel... and how long they have felt that way. But can these two stop squabbling long enough to overcome a lifetime of animosity and misunderstandings, and find their way to love?

A MADNESS IN SPRING

Copyright © 2015 by Kate Noble

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the author.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

Table of Contents

Chapter One	
Chapter Two	
Chapter Three	
Chapter Four	
Chapter Five	
Chapter Six	
Chapter Seven	
Chapter Eight	
Chapter Nine	
Chapter Ten	
Chapter Eleven	
Thank You	
About Kate Noble	
Other Books by Kate Noble	

Chapter One

Spring is a time of awakening.

Sometimes it happens willfully, with green shoots peeking out regardless of the snow. Sometimes, it happens with bluster, endless days of rain and wind clearing the path for the sun. And sometimes it happens with warmth, dissolving the layers that protected through the cold, allowing things to become new again.

In the village of Hemshawe, spring arrived with Bertram and Georgette Gage.

And today, Belinda Leonard would welcome them to the neighborhood.

“No need to escort me, Carlisle, I know the way,” Belinda said as she glided past the ancient butler at Sturridge Manor. She’d spent so much time here since Francesca married Lord Sturridge; it was practically her second home. Not to mention Belinda and Francesca (oh all right, mostly Belinda) had spent all day yesterday planning precisely how to greet the Gages.

It wasn’t often that families from London came to their little village. The only thing that could possibly attract such individuals was the nearby spa town of Tunbridge Wells, and it was not nearly as popular as Bath or the seaside. Of course, Belinda hoped that the Hemshawe Fair and the Harvest Festival would become even greater attractions, and she worked tirelessly to that end. But until that time, people like the Gages would remain quite rare in their little corner of the world.

Therefore Belinda and Francesca (oh all right, mostly Belinda) decided on the blue drawing room, which got the best light and had the largest fireplace, should lighting a fire be necessary. (Spring was taking its time in coming, and more than once Belinda had put away her thickest cloak only to take it out again.) And they decided on a

savory tea, with sandwiches instead of cakes. And they also decided to not have Nanny bring in the baby, even though Francesca insisted the child's adorability would endear anyone to them.

Belinda was a little unsure about the adorability factor of little Johnny. The number of fluids that leaked out of the child was a decided drawback.

So it was that Belinda swung open the doors to the blue drawing room, certain that she would find Francesca and the Gages in their places. She was also arriving at the absolute perfect time, seven minutes after the Gages were due – long enough for Francesca to establish herself as their gracious hostess, but not so long that the Gages will have to repeat themselves upon introductions, and three minutes before the tea tray and sandwiches would be brought out.

Unfortunately, she was not greeted by the sight of Francesca, the Gages, or the tea tray. Instead she was assaulted by the sight of the blue drawing room in complete disarray. Papers everywhere. Books pulled from the shelves. And in the middle of it all, Adam Sturridge.

“Bang bang! You're dead! You have fallen victim to my superior battle strategy!”

The carnage of the blue room aside, the fact that he was lying on his stomach playing with tin soldiers might have been forgiven if the younger brother of Lord Sturridge were seven... instead of seven-and-twenty.

“What on earth...?” she said, her jaw dropping before she clamped it shut.

“Hmm?” Adam looked up from what Belinda supposed to be an intricate battle scene in his immature mind. “Oh god,” he grumbled. “It's you.”

“Yes,” Belinda replied through gritted teeth. It was the only way to avoid unseemly screeching. “It's me. And just what have you done to the drawing room? Where is Francesca? And the Gages?”

“I was obviously using the drawing room,” Adam said as he climbed to his feet, languid as a cat. It was enough to make one hate cats, Belinda thought darkly. “So Francesca put the Gages in the morning room.”

“The *morning room*?” This time there was little way to avoid screeching.

“Yes,” Adam replied. “There’s nothing wrong with the morning room.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the morning room in the morning,” she mocked. “But the light is absolutely horrid after three. They’ll practically be sitting in the dark!”

“They’ll light a fire.”

“The fireplace in that room is little more than a grate,” Belinda said, hands going to her hips. “Because it’s a close, small space that usually enjoys plenty of light and warmth when it’s used. *In the morning.*”

“Yes, do tell me more about the house I grew up in,” Adam drawled.

“I need no reminder that you grew up here. You are littered across my memory like horse manure on a path. However, you don’t live here now,” she continued. “You live in Scotland. And yet you kick the lady of the house and her guests out of her own drawing room! To play with your... toys. Thank you, Mr. Sturridge. Thank you oh so much.”

And with that, she turned on her heel and stalked out of the room.

“Now hold on!” She heard the scrambling as Adam scooted up behind her. She kept her head high as she marched through the halls toward the morning room – all the way on the other side of the house. “You know, for someone who delights in being right all the time, you are wrong on a number of counts.” He assumed the air of a lecturer and began ticking off the items on his fingers. “First, my home is not in Scotland. It’s perhaps in viewing distance of Scotland, but not technically in the country. And second – I was not playing with tin soldiers.”

Belinda stopped in her tracks, and simply turned a raised eyebrow to him. Her most skeptical eyebrow.

“I wasn’t,” he persisted. “I was using the tin soldiers as representations for my herds of sheep in Scot – er, I mean, at my

estate which is not in Scotland, and deciphering the best grazing pattern for them this year.”

“Really,” she said flatly.

“Really.”

“Do your sheep often go ‘bang bang’?”

“Not at first,” he admitted. “But beasts of burden evolve with alarming speed into warmongers.”

She rolled her eyes and continued her stalking towards the morning room. Meanwhile, Adam apparently decided that his point had not yet been made, and began to stroll alongside her.

“Lastly, I did not ‘kick’ Francesca out of the drawing room. When she came in an hour ago to make ready for the Gages’ arrival, she saw I was using it. I offered to move, but she said she would take the Gages elsewhere.”

“Of course she did, and if you had been a gentlemen, you would have insisted on moving.”

“Oh hell, what does it matter?”

“It matters because it was planned.”

“And you do love a plan, don’t you?” he mumbled.

“The drawing room was the only room to receive the Gages.”

“You’ve never even met the Gages, so how would you know?”

“I know perfectly! I know that Mr. Bertram Gage is a friend of your brother from Cambridge, so he’s an educated man who knows that a *morning room* is no place to receive guests. I know he was a soldier after that, so likely he would welcome the comforts that come with having the drawing room at his disposal. I know they’ve rented the Friar’s House, so they are thankfully not superstitious –”

“What does superstition have to do with the morning room?” he interrupted.

“Nothing at all, but it speaks to a good mind. But the *pièce de résistance* is his sister.”

“His sister,” Adam repeated, in that tone that he thought sounded amused but made Belinda’s teeth grate.

“Yes, his sister, Miss Georgette Gage, who is recovering from an illness, hence their coming here, so she can take the waters at

Tunbridge Wells. As such, she would be far more comfortable in the warmth of the drawing room, with the good light and the high fire, than in the pitiful cold of the dark morning room.”

“Oh,” Adam said.

“Yes, *oh*.”

“Well, I do have to apologize to Francesca and Miss Gage then for my imposition. But it does make me wonder.”

“Wonder?” Belinda pulled up short. “About what?”

“About why –if you already know everything about the Gages, you’re invading our house to meet them at all.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Because I have manners, Mr. Sturridge. Something you seemed to lack. Now, if you will excuse me, I will – with my excellent manners – bid you good day.”

And with what she considered to be the final word, Belinda threw open the doors to the morning room, pasted a grand smile on her face, and entered to greet the assembled party.

With Adam right behind her.

“Good afternoon, Francesca!” Belinda said, coming forward with arms outstretched. “I’m so sorry I’m late, I was –”

“Oh no, dearest,” Francesca, Lady Sturridge said, rising with everyone else in the room to meet her. “You are just in time for tea.”

“Oh famous! Are those cook’s vegetable tarts?” Adam interrupted, pushing past Belinda toward the tea tray. He stopped just long enough in his pursuit of food to bow to the strangers in the room. “How’d you do? I’m Adam Sturridge. That’s Belinda Leonard, she doesn’t live here. You must be the Gages!”

That afternoon with the Gages turned out to be full of enlightenments (even with the limitations of the dark and close morning room). They learned that the Gages, along with the sister’s companion Mrs. Clotworthy – a relative of some degrees removed who also seemed delightfully some degrees removed from reality – had taken the Friar’s House not just for the spring and summer, but for the entire year.

“My brother is absolutely adamant that I recover completely before we go back to London,” Miss Gage said, shooting a wry smile

towards her brother, who seemed far too masculine to be squeezed onto the settee next to his sister. “But he tends to forget that the doctors told me I was nearly good as new.”

“Nearly is not perfectly,” Bertram replied, gruffly.

“But I allow it, because I vexed myself silly while he was at war, and now he vexes himself for my sake. We are the only family we have left. Except for Mrs. Clotworthy, of course.”

The lady in question, at the mention of her name, picked her spectacles out of her tea where they had fallen, and wiped them clean with the edge of her shawl before putting them on the end of her nose. “What’s that dear?”

“Nothing, Mrs. Clotworthy,” Bertram sighed.

“Yes, these tarts are very good. Lots of roughage,” she replied.

They also learned that Bertram Gage had not only been a soldier, but one of great distinction.

“You were in the war, I understand.” Adam asked between gulps of tea. “I was in the Foot Guards. You?”

“The 13th Light Dragoons.” Bertram shifted in his seat, uncomfortable. Belinda wasn’t the only one to notice. Francesca and Georgie shared glances, but Adam was, as ever, clueless.

“The 13th?” he asked, blinking. “Now that was an impressive outfit. Likely got commendations and honors heaped on your breast. I knew a chap who said he could barely walk under the weight of all that metal.”

“No.” Bertram’s short answer had the desired effect of cutting short that line of conversation.

“Well... you must enjoy shooting,” Adam tried, ignoring Belinda’s leftward glance. “No one comes to Hemshawe without enjoying shooting. Else they don’t stay very long. Not much else to do.”

“I do not shoot.”

“Oh.” For once, Adam actually seemed to feel the weight of the awkwardness. And Belinda felt sorry enough for him to step in.

“Well, Mr. Gage you must enjoy fishing,” she said smoothly.

“Lord Sturridge has the most beautiful trout stream in the county.”

“I do,” Bertram replied, thankfully lightening the mood. “In fact,

if your brother had not been required to go to Town this week, I would have already imposed for a tour.”

“No need to wait,” Adam said, after shooting Belinda a look that she simply could not decipher. “I would be most pleased to show you.”

And in particular, it was learned that Georgette Gage was very observant.

For, when Adam Sturridge took her brother out to show him Lord Sturridge’s trout stream, and Belinda had found herself appointed with digging up cook’s tart recipe for Mrs. Clotworthy, Miss Gage turned to Francesca and asked, “So, Mr. Sturridge and Miss Leonard. How long have those two been in love?”

Chapter Two

“In love? You cannot be serious. Belinda and Adam have always hated each other. Always.”

It was two days after that auspicious first meeting before Francesca Sturridge was finally able to respond to Georgie Gage’s shocking question. Not because she was struck dumb by the statement – although she well could have been, Georgie didn’t know – but because there was simply no time before. No sooner had Mr. Sturridge and Bertram walked out the door than they came back, the latter having forgotten to reassure himself a second time that Georgie’s shawl was fitted well across her shoulders, and that she was positioned properly by the fire, and that if she wanted a second cup of tea she was welcome to it but more than that could cause stomach complaints. By the time those fears were assuaged, Belinda had returned with the recipe for Mrs. Clotworthy, and that good woman could only send Georgie a helpless shrug. Her ruse had been successful, but far too short in duration.

Thus two days had passed before Georgie laid eyes on Lady Sturridge again. And this time they met not at Sturridge Manor, but in the belly of the beast. Croftburr – Belinda Leonard’s home.

It was the weekly meeting of the Hemshawe Fair and Harvest Festival Committee, which consisted of Belinda and Francesca. However, they were happy to welcome Georgie Gage to their ranks, once she was told of it. And once she convinced her brother it was just the kind of society that would in no way overly task her.

“It didn’t take much doing,” Georgie told them when she was first admitted to Croftburr. “All I had to do was promise to not lift more than a cup of tea, and lie down if I feel at all faint, and to have Mrs. Clotworthy fetch me anything I might need.”

Both Belinda and Francesca glanced to Mrs. Clotworthy, who had

taken up residence in a very large chair by the fire and begun dozing almost immediately.

“Perhaps I will have John put a word in your brother’s ear that it is possible to care *too* much,” Francesca mused.

“Oh please don’t. He’s horribly proud, and I’m sure would hate to be told he’s done something wrong.”

“More than he’d hate to have done something wrong?”

“Ladies!” Belinda interjected. “It is time to call to order the Hemshawe Fair and Harvest Festival Committee.”

“You have a Hemshawe Fair *and* a Harvest Festival? Or do they happen at the same time?” Georgie asked.

“They are two separate festivals. The Fair is in the summer and the Harvest Festival is in the fall.” Francesca answered. “Although Belinda keeps threatening to add a winter-set festival as well.”

Belinda sent her friend a dark look. “Well now that we have a third member to our team I see no reason why we can’t have a third festival.”

“Really?” Francesca said, a mocking smile on her lips. “Oh dear. Georgie, run for your life.”

Over by the fire, Mrs. Clotworthy swallowed a laugh. Belinda, to her credit, laughed outright, before diving back into her planned speech.

“Be that as it may, we have a number of items to address this week, not the least of which are the livestock stalls, which I am informed must be bigger this year for the Hemshawe Fair.”

“Well, last year the pigs did break out and there was that... trampling incident.” Francesca replied.

“If you ask me the vicar deserved all the mud he ate,” Belinda grumbled. “But if it must be addressed it will be addressed. Along with the entertainment, refreshments, and we will need a new judge for the wine tasting, Mr. Greenleaf is sadly indisposed –”

“Belinda!” Francesca smiled tightly. “Perhaps... perhaps it would be best if you read the notes from the last meeting first. So Miss Gage can become familiar with what we’re doing.”

“Of course,” Belinda replied. “I should have thought of that. I

drew up this itinerary days ago, before I knew Miss Gage would be joining us.” She glanced briefly about her. “But where is my notebook?”

“I don’t know, dearest,” Francesca replied. “Did you bring it downstairs?”

“Of course I did,” Belinda replied, before standing to check her seat, under the cushions.

“Oh, um...” Francesca fluttered, helplessly.

Georgie suppressed a smile. Lady Sturridge’s attempt was admirable, but it was obvious subterfuge was not her natural state. “Perhaps you should retrace your steps?” Georgie offered. “That’s how I always find something I’ve lost.”

“I haven’t lost it, I’ve –” Belinda sighed. “Yes, perhaps you’re right. I’ll be back in trice. With my notebook.”

Belinda left the room, closing the door behind her, muttering to herself as she went. “...it was on my bedside table last night, so...”

Finally alone – a snoring Mrs. Clotworthy aside – Francesca had wasted no time in producing the missing notebook from beneath her skirts, and getting down to the real business of the day.

“Belinda and Adam in love? You must be mistaken. You simply must,” she insisted.

“I am perfectly serious,” Georgie smiled. “And although I could be mistaken, I rarely am.”

“It’s true,” Mrs. Clotworthy said from her chair, without so much as moving an eyelid. “The girl knows the minds of others better than she knows her own, I’ve said.”

“Thank you,” Georgie nodded. “Although I’m not entirely certain that’s a compliment.”

“But you’ve only just met both Belinda and Adam. And I can’t imagine that they made the best impression – Adam especially.”

Georgie acknowledged the truth of that statement with a single shoulder shrug.

“How could you possibly have any idea about their hearts?”

Georgie cocked her head to one side. “You recognize that your brother-in-law was a bit brash when we met, yes?” At Francesca’s nod

Georgie continued. "But you still like him."

"Of course. Adam is a very kind soul, even if he can be... overly casual. Which is exactly what drives Belinda mad about him."

"And Miss Leonard is quite exacting, but you still like her as well."

"Of course I do," Francesca smiled. "She's the best friend I've ever had."

"So two people who are supremely likeable not liking each other does not strike you as odd? Or perhaps, forced?"

Francesca's pretty brow came down. "But some people in the world are just destined to never get along. Belinda and Adam are like oil and water – and they always have been."

Georgie's gaze narrowed. "How long have you known them?"

"Oh, I've known Adam and my John since I was a girl. My mother was particular friends with theirs, so we would often spend holidays together. I spent a good many summers in Hemshawe in my youth. And Belinda moved here at about nine or ten, if I recall correctly. Her parents had died, and she'd been sent all the way from India to live with her uncle, Sir Henry Leonard."

"India?" Georgie asked. "That must have been quite the change."

"I believe it was. But Belinda would never let it show. She simply held her head up and marched forward, the way she handles everything."

"I remember the day we first met her. Sir Henry had brought her over to Sturridge Manor for tea, and we were all playing bowls. She came right up to us, assured us she was quite good at the game and asked which one of us wanted to be her partner. My darling John was nearly a decade older – and of course he wasn't my darling then – but since he was gallantly spending time with us children he offered to pair with her."

"No wonder your John got along with my brother at school," Georgie smiled. "The two are a pair."

Francesca sighed, lost in her own memory. But then her expression clouded. "The game came down to one bowl, Adam against Belinda. Belinda proved that she was quite good, and so the game had

become quite competitive. Belinda beat us by one point. She cheered, we all applauded, and then she'd turned to Adam. He politely congratulated her and then turned away. But not before leaning down to me and telling me that he'd had to let her win, since everyone felt sorry for her, having lost her family."

"Oh," Georgie's eyes went wide. "And Belinda overheard?"

"I'd never seen anyone go so pale, then so red. But instead of crying, or lashing out, she just challenged him to a game."

"And what did Mr. Sturridge say?"

"He said he wasn't going to play against a bad sport, a girl, and one so much younger than himself," Francesca replied. "So Belinda had them reset the pins, and bowled a perfect set. Then she did it again, and again. She did it until John started laughing. And then I did. Adam was young and prideful and turned beet red before stalking off the green."

"But he's no longer young and prideful," Georgie chided gently.

"True, and honestly, it didn't last long then either – he came forward and tried to make amends after tea, but Belinda would have none of it. She ignored his invitation to play cards and settled in next to me, and taught me all about how girls in India wrapped their shawls."

"Hmm." Georgie fingered her chin. "Sounds less like a case of oil and water and more like they got off on the wrong foot."

"If that's so, they've been on the wrong foot for fifteen years," Francesca replied. "I doubt they would know the right one if it smacked them in the face."

"Well," Georgie mused, "perhaps we should show them the right foot, and see if they recognize it."

Francesca sat up straight. From the winged-back chair, Georgie was certain she heard a distinctive chortle. Luckily, if Lady Sturridge heard she paid it no mind.

"What on earth do you mean?"

Georgie leaned in conspiratorially. "It has been my experience that to have so much antagonism towards someone, a person must inevitably think about them a great deal."

Francesca nodded, doubtful.

“And that having someone be at the forefront of one’s thoughts makes that person extremely important. More important than perhaps someone held in dislike should be.”

Francesca grew silent for a moment, pondering, her mouth pushing into a frown.

“You wish for your brother-in-law to find someone to be happy with, don’t you?”

Her head came up. “Of course I do.”

“And you wish for Belinda to find happiness as well?”

“Naturally – but the idea of them being in love with each other, it’s... it’s... preposterous!”

Georgie refrained from giving in to a frustrated sigh. She wasn’t surprised that Lady Sturridge proved hard to convince. She’d been witness to years of animosity. While Georgie has only been witness to strained tension and a half-dozen heated glances.

Glances that could have burned the sun.

“If you don’t agree I of course will not make any further mention of it,” Georgie said. “But there is an easy way to test my theory.”

Francesca’s eyebrow went up. “How?”

“Simply mention Mr. Sturridge in Miss Leonard’s presence. Gauge her reaction. With new eyes.” She smiled, and picked at the lace trim of her sleeve. “I could be wrong. I’ve been wrong before.” Not often. Rarely, in fact. Maybe once, but she couldn’t be blamed for thinking her governess would fall in love with the man who delivered their pastries. She was seven, and half in love with him herself. “But if I’m right...”

Francesca turned a sly, knowing look to Georgie. “You’re a matchmaker, Miss Gage.”

“My brother would say I’m a mischief maker,” she replied. A click of the door latch had them scooting apart just a moment before it swung open. “Shall we find out which is true?”

“I have absolutely no idea what happened to my notebook,” a very frazzled Belinda Leonard said as she marched into the room. Her dress was impeccable, but the state of her hair said she had been

searching every nook and cranny of the house.

“Never mind, dearest, I found it right after you left,” Francesca said. This lie came smoother, with only the slightest hesitation in her voice and blush on her cheek. Belinda took the proffered book with equal parts relief and frustration.

“Excellent. Well, then we can read the notes from last week’s meeting and –”

“There is no need,” Georgie interrupted. “Lady Sturridge has kindly brought me up to date.”

“She has? You have?” Belinda said, trying very hard not to look heartbroken. Then, she picked her head up, and marched forward. “Good. Then perhaps it’s best if we discover what your talents are Miss Gage, to see what tasks would best suit you.”

“Oh goodness!” Georgie laughed. “I am sadly untalented. I have only a little ear for music, I cannot paint or draw. I run my brother’s household, but as it consists of little more than myself and Mrs. Clotworthy, I cannot claim any great organizational talent either. I do enjoy putting together a good outfit. Perhaps something with arranging colors?”

“Colors!” Belinda smiled. “Perfect – for the Fair, we will be putting together a summer fruit display on the central table on the stage. You would delight in that, I am sure.”

“Lovely,” Georgie agreed, letting a slow smile spread across her face. “Mr. Adam Sturridge was saying just the other day how he liked my bonnet, and I trimmed that myself. So a fruit display will be perfect.”

“Mr. Sturridge?” Belinda’s head came up from what she was jotting in her notebook. “He said he liked your hat?”

“Yes,” Georgie replied sweetly. “Why?”

“Nothing,” Belinda mumbled, shaking her head. “I should have said before that Mr. Sturridge has no taste when it comes to hats, but yours was very lovely.” She fidgeted with her skirt. And while Georgie was not long acquainted with Belinda, she would guess that Belinda was not one to fidget. “Perhaps he’s learned a thing or two about fashion up in Scotland.”

Then Belinda did something strange. Her hand, which once was fidgeting, went up to her blonde locks, smoothing them. As if adjusting a bonnet that she was then surprised to not find on her head.

Georgie sent a look to Francesca, who was wide-eyed and silent, watching Belinda.

“Scotland?” Georgie asked, all innocence.

“Yes, where he lives. Well, nearly. He inherited his mother’s estate on the border and is supposed to be up there setting it to rights. Yet he’s down here, aggravating me.”

“...and meeting his new nephew,” Francesca reminded gently, once she found her voice.

“Yes. Of course. But let’s have no more talk of Adam Sturridge and consign him back to Scotland where he should be,” Belinda said, shaking out her shoulders. “Now that the cornucopia is sorted, perhaps we should tackle the issue of the livestock stalls?”

As Belinda launched into a detailed explanation of why the vicar and his trampling last year were the cause of this year’s current problem, Georgie shared a look with Francesca. Lady Sturridge’s eyes were positively shining with newly discovered glee.

Matchmaker *and* mischief-maker. And very pleased to be both.

Chapter Three

“What a magnificent day,” Adam said, lazily stretching his arm overhead. The sky above was a robin’s egg blue, the grass under his back the sharpest new green. For the first time in months, it seemed as if Mother Nature was not of a mercurial mindset, and the good weather would hold.

It was days like this that reminded him of growing up – lazy, do-nothing days where all one needed was a few friends and a fishing pole to completely remove the idea of lessons and responsibilities from one’s mind.

The friends and the fishing pole were in place, as he was lying on the bank of the trout stream, John and Bertram beside him.

“It’s almost too nice a day to waste fishing,” John said.

“I think you mean too nice a day to *not* waste fishing,” Adam replied, and caught Bertram smiling in approval.

“I have tenants to see to – now that the thaw has finally come, we have fields to dredge and seed to plant.”

“And fish to catch,” Adam responded reasonably. “Days like this need to be celebrated, not worked. Mr. Gage, back me, would you?”

“I cannot say. Work in London is rarely as dependent on the weather as it is in the country. But I admit, enjoying the first nice day perhaps makes the less nice ones more bearable.”

John inhaled deeply, and recast his line. John may feel guilt about not working for one day, but at least he had the sense to not let it stop him from taking a break. Lately, his brother had been so terribly focused on making certain the estate was well managed, under control. And Adam knew why of course. Some might think it was the baby – wanting to make sure everything was perfect for little Johnny’s sake. Some might think that in the wake of their father’s passing a few years ago, he’d begun to feel the weight of the title. But Adam knew it

was because of what he himself had found in Scotland.

Or rather, on the border of Scotland.

Upon his father's death, John had inherited the title and the family seat in Hemshawe, but Adam had inherited his own estate in Northumberland, within spitting distance of the border. It came as quite a surprise. It had belonged to his uncle, but he died without issue, and so passed to Adam's mother. Since she'd been gone for some years, it had then passed into the care of his father. By the time it had gotten to Adam, it was nearly forgotten that it had been in the family at all – except by the attorneys who drew up their parents' wills.

Yes, it came as a surprise, but a good one. Adam had been a bit at odd ends. He'd gone to university, had served in the Army. He vaguely considered studying the law, but never had any true love of it. Then there he was, being handed an estate. A future.

A future that no one had bothered to check on in a decade.

When he first got to Northumberland, he thought it was the best practical joke anyone had ever played. The land hadn't been tilled in ages. The house – more a castle, really – was crumbling. And the sheep had gone wild.

He'd found the land manager drunk in a pub, where he had apparently been living for some time. Not on the property overseeing things. Just sending in reports that were never read and collecting his pay.

Adam could hardly blame the man. He might have been the world's worst land manager, but as he'd had the world's worst owners up until now, he was merely following suit. Still those habits would prove hard to change so the man was let go from his post, as Adam began the rigorous two-year battle to bring his new home into sustainability.

He'd found a new land manager. He'd found a good steward. He'd learned all he could about sheep, and how to bring them back to heel if they've gone wild. He'd had to apply to John for funds to help repair the tenant's cottages, and had finally been able to pay him back, with their latest shearing.

It had been hard work – the hardest Adam had ever done in his

life. But it was good work.

It had also been lonely work.

He didn't know a soul in Northumberland. He'd met a few recently, but as he rarely left his estate, anything approaching a social engagement was exceedingly rare. Even having just one of his friends up there – hell, even just one person he *knew* – would change everything.

It was also damnably cold.

Which was why, when John invited him down for Christmas to meet the new baby, Adam jumped at the chance. His new land manager and steward had proved very trustworthy. And the sheep were happily eating their feed and growing their wool. He could visit family for a month. Or two.

Although now that he was well into his third month, he was really going to have to consider heading back soon – likely within the next few days. There were things to do.

But not today. Not on a rare, gorgeous early spring day with fish that needed catching.

“Although, they don't seem to be biting,” Bertram said.

“Yes, I fear I came back from London to sleeping fish,” John grumbled.

“How is it that you have your own trout stream and you've never learned the point of fishing?” Adam cried, pulling himself up to seated and checking on his own line. Nothing.

“I thought the point was to catch fish. To eat.”

“You've positively become a killjoy, John. And I refuse to allow any joy-killing on the last few days of my tenure here.”

“Then you best not turn around,” John said, and of course, Adam had to swivel around.

Sturridge Manor stood in the distance, and at that moment, three people were emerging out onto the back lawn. Three people in dresses. That would imply it was his sister-in-law Francesca, Miss Gage by her height, and...

“Oh, hell,” Adam grumbled.

“What?” Bertram, too, turned in his seat. Following Adam's gaze

he asked, “Miss Leonard? What about her?”

“Nothing,” John offered. “She and Adam tend to be at odds.”

“Why?” Bertram asked. “She seemed like a very amiable young lady to me.”

“Yes,” Adam replied. “To you.”

“Don’t mind him,” John offered. “It has to do with a long ago bowls game. One where Adam was soundly beaten and proved a bad sport about it.”

“I was twelve,” Adam said. “And I made my apologies and offered to play cards with her after. I was refused.”

“Sounds like you still are twelve,” Bertram said under his breath, and John guffawed.

Adam just rolled his eyes. If he was still twelve, he would have stalked off with anger, but as an adult he could easily recognize that he’d been an impulsive twelve-year-old, appalled to have lost to girl of nine who had walked up to them and declared herself good. He remembered thinking she was a pretty, sad little thing, too – until she started playing, that is.

But over time, what should have faded away as a childish spat had just compounded. Every time he saw her after that, she would always find something wrong with him. When he came home during school holidays, or before he headed out to the continent in his red coat. Or when he’d first gone up to not-Scotland.

Granted, at some point he perhaps began needling Belinda, to see how far he could push her exasperation. So far, he had reached no limit.

And to be honest, it was getting a bit exhausting. But it was their way.

Let’s see... he was wearing his trousers rolled up. God knows she’d mock him for that. If they were further away he might roll them down, just to avoid an argument in mixed company, but then he decided there was something delightful about watching Belinda have to hold her tongue in front of others.

“Hello, darling!” Francesca called out, and John rose to greet her with a kiss on the cheek. “Have you caught anything?”

“Not a bite,” John replied, then turned to the others. “Miss Gage, Miss Leonard. Lovely to see you.”

“Not too cold, Georgie?” Bertram asked.

“I have two shawls on,” Miss Gage replied with a patient smile. “Miss Leonard gave me hers and it is quite warm.”

“Thank you Miss Leonard,” Bertram smiled, turning to Belinda, who graced him with a smile in return. Funny, Adam had no idea she *could* smile. He hadn’t seen it in... ever. “I fear my sister is always a little too eager to cast off her illness, even before it’s willing to go.”

“One can never be too careful – especially in the spring. The weather can be so changeable. We want it to warm up so desperately we throw aside caution.”

Her eyes flicked to Adam’s trousers – or rather to his bared calves. An eyebrow went up. *There it is*, he thought with a little thrill of satisfaction. But just as quickly as he had gained her attention, she swung it away again, as Miss Gage made an announcement.

“I’ve promised Bertram that all the fires will remain high at the Friar’s House, even during the party.”

“Party?” John asked, taking the bait.

“Yes, dearest,” Francesca answered. “The Gages have decided to hold a dinner party in a fortnight, to say thank you to the neighborhood for such a warm welcome.”

“We have?” Bertram asked.

“It will be just the thing!” Georgie beamed. “And don’t worry, I won’t be lifting a finger – Miss Leonard will be helping to organize it all.”

“We cannot ask Miss Leonard to –”

“It is no difficulty, Mr. Gage,” Belinda said. “I dearly love to organize.”

“Truer words have never been spoken,” Adam couldn’t stop himself from saying. But Belinda – and everyone else – continued on as if they hadn’t heard him.

“And I’ve always wanted to explore the Friar’s House. We used to hear stories from the owners about how it has haunted secret passages.”

“Haunted secret passages?” Bertram asked. “That information, I admit, was not disclosed to us.”

“Well, Belinda can tell you all about it on the way in for luncheon,” Miss Gage said. And before Adam knew what was happening, they were abandoning their fishing poles and heading back up to the house. Francesca took John’s arm, telling him how little Johnny was waiting for them after his nap, and his recent coos and smiles. Bertram had Belinda on one arm, and made to take Miss Gage’s with his other, but before he could she had moved to Adam’s side. A bright smile met her brother’s surprised blink, but he simply turned and began to lead Miss Leonard inside.

“Give them a moment,” Georgie whispered to Adam. “I want to give them some space.”

“Afraid of ghost stories, Miss Gage?” Adam asked jovially. “I assure you the Friar’s House is not really haunted.”

“No, of course not,” she said. “Don’t you think they look well together?”

“Who?”

She nodded ahead of them. Adam’s brow came down. “Well they are... of a height?” Belinda was a tall female, and only a few inches shorter than her companion.

“I think they are suited in more ways than height,” Georgie replied.

“Miss Leonard – Belinda. And your brother?” Adam was certain he could not be hearing her correctly. “You cannot be serious.”

“Whyever not?” Georgie replied. “I assure you, my brother is quite eligible. As is Miss Leonard.”

“I have no doubt he is. And... she is too, I suppose. But...”

“But what?”

But he’d never even thought of Belinda ever being suited for anyone. The idea of her married – it was just so strange. She would drive the poor man crazy with her constant need to be right and fix everything to her liking. He’d been firmly convinced for some time that she would live and die an old maid.

“My brother needs a woman in his life,” Georgie said, seeing his

confusion. “And as for Miss Leonard... well, surely you’ve noticed the admiring glances he’s sent her.”

“He has?” Adam asked. For a moment, he felt like he’d lost his bearings, and was not at the home where he’d grown up. This entire thing was terribly unfamiliar.

Georgie’s cheeks colored very suddenly. “I’ve said too much. Let us speak of blander things. Will you be attending our party at the Friar’s House, Mr. Sturridge. Please do say you’ll come.”

Adam’s mind swung violently from his musings to Georgie’s question. The party was in a fortnight. He had been planning on heading back to his own estate before the end of this week. He’d already begun packing, and composed the letters to his steward and land manager to let them know of his arrival.

But he hadn’t posted them yet.

His eyes flicked ahead of them, to where Bertram was laughing at something Belinda had said. And she was laughing too.

And something strange lanced through him. Not unlike when his horse took a jump Adam was not prepared for.

Maybe he should stay a little while longer. Just until he was sure that the good weather was going to hold. To make his journey easier, of course.

“Nothing would please me more, Miss Gage.”

Chapter Four

It was over the course of the next few days that Adam decided that Miss Georgette Gage was completely mad.

Oh, not really. In most things, she showed strong common sense and good humor – for instance, when she was dealing with her brother's fears about her health. (As someone who had an older brother himself, he admired her restraint.) And she was generally a very happy, vivacious new member of their circle.

So it was just too bad that she had somehow abandoned all sense and thought that her brother Bertram was interested in Belinda Leonard.

This wasn't a conclusion he came to lightly. No, he had spent the past few days observing the two of them very closely. And he'd had ample opportunity to do so – he made sure of it.

Luckily for Adam he did not have to go far for observation. Not only did Francesca and Belinda have the Hemshawe Fair *and* a Harvest Festival to plan, but now they had a party to help Miss Gage put together. Thus the three of them had become completely inseparable. As Belinda walked there daily for some reason (Sturridge Manor and Croftburr were not adjoining – one had to walk a bit of the main road of Hemshawe, but they were within a few easy miles of each other) and Francesca insisted on having her housekeeper help with the party's organizational efforts, naturally everyone ended up at Sturridge Manor.

Mrs. Clotworthy had taken a spring chill, so Bertram Gage found it necessary to escort his sister on her daily outings (really, didn't the man have better things to do?). As such, Bertram Gage and Belinda Leonard were often in the same room together.

And to Adam's eye, they showed absolutely no partiality for each other.

Because when Bertram crossed the room to bend over Belinda's

hand, that was common courtesy, wasn't it? He bent over Francesca's as well... although, as it was Francesca's house, shouldn't he bend over hers first?

And when Miss Gage complained she was too warm and unwrapped the shawl Belinda had leant her, she gave it to Bertram to give back to Belinda. The fact that he had laid it across her shoulders was nothing more than good manners.

Perhaps Belinda smiled at Bertram when he did so, but then she went on talking about the decorations or some such thing for Miss Gage's party like nothing had happened.

But that she had smiled at all...

However, Adam had to admit, contrary to previous opinion, Belinda *did* smile regularly. Just not at him, hence he wasn't used to seeing it. She smiled at Francesca, at Miss Gage, at John, and at the maid who brought in their tea.

She smiled at Bertram.

But never at Adam.

So it was with some surprise that he realized that not only did Belinda smile, but that she had a rather nice smile. Not just that she had straight teeth and the requisite number of them, but the whole act did something interesting to her face. What he had always assumed was the harsh stare of her judgment transformed into the light of someone who had a joke inside their head, constantly amusing them.

But not only did Belinda smile, she *laughed* when listening to Bertram tell a story of how he once lost his horse in his own mews.

"When I turn around, there he was, following me at three paces the entire length of the mews."

It was not the bitter cackle he'd expected. Instead, it was a light, happy sound that filled up the room, and prompted others to join in.

All except Adam, that is. How come she never laughed like that when he told a joke? He was, in his own estimation, quite funny. And Bertram losing his horse in the narrow alley behind his house showed him to be an idiot. That was worthy of scorn, not lovely, lyrical laughter!

Ah, that must be it. She must be simply humoring him. Being

polite to their new neighbor in the face of his obvious stupidity.

So, when they walked out the next day through Hemshawe to look in shop windows, and Belinda ended up on Bertram's arm, he knew she took it only out of a desire to not embarrass either Miss Gage as the man's sister or Francesca as his host.

Yes. That was the only reason.

Thus, Adam was content that there was no feasible way Bertram Gage was interested in Belinda. Or, if he was, certainly Belinda was not at all interested in *him*. In fact, she likely found his attentions odious. Hence the over-bright smile and the cheerful laughter. She probably hated to be in his presence at all. Absolutely dreaded being left alone with him. Not that there was any danger of their being left alone together... or was there? If Miss Gage was cunning – and she certainly seemed to be – then she might engineer a way for the two of them to be separated from the group. And Francesca – wanting nothing but happiness for her friend – would go along with it.

It was with that in mind that he decided it would be best – yes, it would be – to protect Belinda from such a fate.

As much as he might loathe Belinda Leonard, it was, without a doubt, the gentlemanly thing to do.

"Where are you going?" he called out from the great curving staircase in the main entrance hall. He'd used to slide down these banisters as a child (and all right, as a young man – and a not so young man) but at that moment he simply bounded down them two at a time.

"To call on Miss Gage," a surprised Francesca had replied, as she pulled on a pair of gloves and her cloak – it was still too cool to go without it.

"They're... they're not coming here today?" he asked. Damn, he'd had it all worked out. He'd get John to leave off his desk and papers for once and get Bertram to help him do... something, and Belinda would be free to go about ordering everyone around and making very long lists without Bertram over her shoulder.

"We decided yesterday that there was no use in planning a party at the Friar's House if we weren't at the Friar's House." She looked at

him skeptically. “For heaven’s sake Adam, you were there when we discussed this yesterday.”

“I was?” Yesterday was a bit of a blur of silly party details and watching Bertram Gage drool over Belinda’s hand. “I was, I suppose. And yes, that would make sense.” Adam nodded quickly. “Actually, I might be able to be of some help. I’ll come along, shall I?”

“How,” Francesca asked, bewildered, “could you be of any help?”

“I can... go up on ladders and hang things, or move heavy furniture. That sort of thing.”

“There are footmen for ‘that sort of thing,’ and besides, we are only discussing and making lists today. Wouldn’t you be happier –”

“Too late, my coat’s on,” he said, flipping his coat over his shoulders and onto his back. “Besides, I’ve always wanted to see inside the Friar’s House... shall we?”

So it was that Adam ended up in the parlor of the Friar’s House, listening to the endless discussion over which butcher in town would be able to provide the best spring lamb, and what flowers would be available from Sturridge Manor’s gardens.

And Bertram Gage was nowhere in sight.

“My brother?” Miss Gage said, when he entered. “He’s gone over to speak with our landlord today. Wanted to make sure they are informed of the party, no doubt, and the he thinks my rooms are too chilly.”

“Yes, it’s so unfortunate,” Belinda said.

“It is?” Miss Gage replied with a light in her eyes as she glanced to Adam.

“It is?” Adam said, his brow coming down.

“Yes – he would be able to tell us what capacity the stables have, for when the guests arrive.”

And so he was stuck. And halfway to banging his head against a wall.

To be honest, at least they were very interesting walls. The Friar’s House was an old monastery, built in the thirteenth century, but it was taken over when Henry VIII decided Catholicism wasn’t at all the thing. It was half torn down by the time someone decided to build

anew atop its rubble. The result was half crumbled stone, half manor house, with a turret in one corner and Grecian columns lining another side.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew the rumors of secret passages the monks had created to escape persecution as long as they could, and of the monk who still walked the halls of the old section.

“And if this fete is meant to have dancing, we simply must book the musicians now – Tunbridge Wells has a few good quartets, but they are in high demand,” Belinda was saying, going down a checklist in her notebook. “I would recommend the Gregsons, they have a tuba, but the Dilby string quartet would do in a pinch –”

Really, was this all women talked about? Details?

“Who cares?” he said all of a sudden.

All three heads of ladies turned his way. His skin burned hot.

“I mean, certainly, that I have no ear for music, so I... I would not take much notice if there was a tuba there, or not,” he mumbled.

“Perhaps I’m not suited to... help with musical choices.”

“Perhaps?” This sardonic note from Belinda, who didn’t even look up from her notebook.

“I know!” Miss Gage cried. “Cook is preparing several different treats for us to try for the party. You should try them for us first, refine the selection to your six or seven favorites.”

“Refine the selection... test them for poison,” Belinda said casually.

“Excellent suggestion,” Francesca said, ignoring Belinda. “We will call you if we need you.”

“We shan’t need you,” Belinda said.

“I’ll direct you to the kitchens, Mr. Sturridge,” Miss Gage said, jumping to her feet.

She walked a little ways down the hall with him, until they came to an intersection.

“It’s down this way, through that door at the end of the hall, then down the stairs. Tell Cook I said to start you with the cream puffs. They are Bertram’s favorite.”

“Bertram,” Adam scoffed. “Yes, I imagine he does love a good

cream puff.”

“What was that?” Miss Gage asked.

“Nothing,” Adam replied automatically. Then, he hesitated. “You mentioned the other day that you think your brother would be a good match for Miss Leonard. I simply cannot see it. In fact I have seen nothing out of the ordinary.”

Miss Gage cocked her head to one side. “My brother is reserved. But I do know that he plans to ask her for the first two dances at the party.”

Adam was flummoxed. “Yes, but... that doesn’t mean Belinda likes him at all.”

Miss Gage watched him closely. “My brother is an eligible man. And I may be biased, but one I think very amiable. Would you deny Miss Leonard the chance to have her affection grow?”

“No, but...” But what? But he wouldn’t wish Miss Leonard on anyone? No, that wasn’t it – that sentiment was rote; hollow.

“It seems very unfair of you, you know,” Miss Gage was saying, her lips forming a perfect pout. “Miss Leonard will never have the man she wants, so why should she not find some happiness with a man who might want her?”

His head snapped up. “What do you mean?”

Miss Gage looked askance, as if she had been caught with a secret she shouldn’t have told. “Nothing important,” she said hastily. “Now, down the hall, through the door, and then down the stairs. Don’t forget!”

She gave the world’s briefest curtsy, and trotted back to the parlor where Francesca and Belinda awaited her with no doubt endless questions about her preference in musical instruments. Which left Adam stunned in the middle of the hallway.

What had Miss Gage meant when she said Belinda couldn’t have the man she wanted? There was someone Belinda wanted? Someone she couldn’t have?

The idea of Belinda wanting anyone was mind-boggling. He’d known her since she was nine and had never seen the blush of love on her cheek. He’d never seen her flirt or simper. She was far too happy

organizing life for herself and her uncle, and being a complete annoyance.

He wandered down the hall, lost in thought as he went through the door Miss Gage had indicated. Or at least he thought it was that one, he wasn't really paying attention.

The idea that Belinda wanted someone was strange enough, but the idea that there was someone she *couldn't* have... that was somehow even more disturbing.

Because if one were to take a step back and observe from a far, there should really be no one that Belinda Leonard couldn't have if she wished it. She was the niece of Sir Henry Leonard of Croftburr. She was an heiress in her own right, and (he grudgingly admitted) well respected in Hemshawe and Tunbridge Wells. And she was – when she wasn't scowling – notably pretty. If you liked the dark-eyed, golden-haired, high-cheekboned type. By all accounts, if she smiled once in a while, there shouldn't be anyone she couldn't have.

Unless...

He turned another corner – wait, was he supposed to turn a corner? It didn't matter. What mattered was the path his thoughts were taking.

A rather surprising path.

Because there really *shouldn't* be anyone Belinda couldn't have... unless she couldn't admit aloud that she fancied the person, for some reason.

If her feelings were unknown or unrequited.

If she was in love with a person she couldn't approach. Because it was someone she always professed to hate.

A person like... Adam.

A strange sensation coursed through his body. It was like all of the blood in his veins stopped moving, then reversed course. A subtle shift in the world changing his life irrevocably.

If Belinda Leonard had feelings for him ... feelings other than pure loathing, that is ...

He pulled up short. And realized, that while his thoughts were taking him on a curious journey, his feet were taking him on an

equally strange one, and he faced a dead end.

He turned around, and saw three different hallways shooting off of the one he was in – and for the life of him, he could not remember which one he'd come from.

Damn it to hell. Not only had Belinda Leonard bewitched his brain, somehow she had got him totally and completely lost.

Chapter Five

“Where on earth is Adam?”

Belinda looked up from the pastry tray. She had been about to try one of the most marvelous looking cream puffs, when the mention of Adam Sturridge left a sour taste in her mouth. Too bad, as Georgie’s cook – who she’d brought down with them from London – had produced the most delicious looking array of treats Belinda had ever laid eyes on.

“Madame Florian, didn’t he come down to the kitchens?” Georgie asked the stout woman who had come up with the tray of treats. “I sent him down to you.”

“*Non* – we’ve seen no young gentleman, Mademoiselle,” Madame Florian replied in a thick French accent. Then she went pale and her eyes widened. “I hope the ghost did not abduct him.”

Francesca gasped, but Belinda rolled her eyes. Everyone knew the old stories about the ghost of a monk who haunted the Friar’s House halls, but all the ghost had ever done was keep the less strong-minded from renting the property. He’d never made an appearance.

“Don’t worry, Francesca,” she said, putting aside her little plate of sweets. “I’m certain he just decided to explore a bit and got lost. You know how distractible he is.”

“It is entirely possible I gave him the wrong instructions on how to get down to the kitchens,” Miss Gage mused. “Oh dear, I should hate for him to miss the desserts. I have a feeling his opinion would be invaluable.”

More like he would shove the treats in his mouth five at a time, Belinda thought, but she said nothing.

“We should go after him,” Francesca said, after a nod from Georgie. “I’m sure if we split up we’ll be able to find him in no time.”

“Yes, what a delightful idea, I think – ohhhhhh,” Georgie said as

she rose to her feet, and swiftly sat back down again.

“What is it?” Belinda asked, crossing the room in a trice.

“Nothing,” Georgie said, pressing a hand to her forehead. “Just a bit dizzy, is all.”

Mrs. Clotworthy was already at the girl’s side, having moved faster than Belinda had known her to be capable of. She felt Georgie’s face.

“Chilled,” she grumbled, a touch of fear in her voice. “Too chilled.”

“Should we send for the doctor?” Francesca asked, worried. “Or your brother?”

“No!” Georgie said, forcefully. Then, her voice receded to a whisper. “Just, you stay with me. Mrs. Clotworthy too. Belinda, go find Mr. Sturridge. I will be fine momentarily.”

“Are you certain?” Belinda asked. “I’ve read articles about why women are prone to fainting, it might have to do with the constriction of the lungs by –”

“I’m sure,” Georgie said, definitively. “It’s all right. Go.”

With unsure steps, and a glance back at Georgie on the appropriately named fainting couch, Belinda headed down the hall to search for one errant Adam Sturridge.

She wouldn’t put it past Adam to have just taken flight. He couldn’t have found their party-planning of the remotest interest. She’d made sure of it – pulling out all her most boring ideas and itemizations in the hopes it would drive him away.

In fact, if she had any idea where they were, she would have gone to the stables first, to see if he’d taken a horse. But Georgie said he must have gotten lost, so she would be a good friend and check the house before going outside.

Although, it wasn’t like Adam to miss the chance for sweets.

Then again, she mused, rounding a corner and coming into a hallway that curved in a curious fashion, Adam had been acting strange for the past few days.

It wasn’t just that he was always hanging about them – that would have just been annoying. No, it was that when he was with

them, he was unusually silent.

Normally, Adam would have forced himself to the center of any conversation. He would have been loud, and jovial, making everyone laugh within minutes and ready to leave off all their responsibilities and go out fishing. But lately he'd been so quiet. Listening to their conversations about planning the party.

And watching.

More than once, she had discovered his eyes on her. He'd looked away immediately, like he had been caught out at something. At first, she thought there was something on her face, but there couldn't be something on her face two days in a row. She checked. Multiple times.

But he wasn't always silent. Oh no. Yesterday, he'd taken it upon himself to talk to her.

Voluntarily.

They had just said goodbye to the Gages, having spent the afternoon walking through Hemshawe. The thaw seemed to be holding, and people were eager to be out and about. It was the first opportunity to introduce Georgie and her brother to the various shopkeepers they would need to patronize for the party, so it had been a very eventful outing. Georgie had walked along with John and Francesca so Francesca could make the introductions, while Mr. Gage had taken up Belinda's arm. Leaving Adam at the rear, a constant itch on the back of her neck.

They had waved goodbye to the Gages as the road forked, Georgie and Bertram going off toward the Friar's House and everyone else heading to Sturridge Manor.

"Coming back with us, are you?" Adam had said gruffly. She had jumped. She had half forgotten that he was there. (Of course, her other half would never be able to forget his looming presence.)

"I left my notebook and some things, I must retrieve them."

"They'll be there tomorrow. And God knows you'll be there tomorrow."

She had stiffened her back. "I happen to need them before then. Trying to be rid of me? You could have simply excused yourself from walking out with us and spared yourself my company."

“Yes, I suppose I could have,” he’d said soft enough that he might have thought no one heard. But Belinda had the hearing of a bat. At least, she did when it came to Adam.

“Further more, you could simply go home to Scotland, and spare yourself my company for as long as you see fit.”

“It’s not Scotland,” he had grumbled. “And I can’t leave yet.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve... I have something that I’m doing.”

“And what is that?” she’d asked.

“Um...” he had stuttered. “Being neighborly to the Gages. With John having to hie off to London every other day, I want to make sure they are well settled. Besides, I need to repair my first ill impression that I gave them.”

“I... I see,” she had said, because really, what else was there to say? It made a strange sort of sense, and showed some manners she had not thought Adam Sturridge capable of.

“And how are you liking our – I mean, *your* – new neighbors?” he had asked, his hands going behind his back.

Well, if he wanted to have a civil conversation, she had decided could play along.

“I like them very much. Miss Gage is an excellent sort.”

“Yes. And her brother?” he’d asked.

“Mr. Gage is very amiable.”

“Do you find him so?” Adam had asked. “I think him a little stand offish. Not at all welcoming.” He’d eyed her closely. So closely that Belinda had almost felt the need to step back, but held her ground.

“Then you and I have had very different experiences of him,” she had replied, not bothering to hide her bewilderment. “I think your sister-in-law is calling me.”

“No she’s n–”

“Francesca!” Belinda had moved ahead, not allowing any more strange conversation from Adam Sturridge, or close looks.

She thought she’d be free of it when they decided to meet at the Friar’s House – at Belinda’s suggestion. Instead, she was now forced to try to find an errant and strange Adam who had somehow got lost and

made it so Miss Gage felt faint and Belinda was without cream puffs at tea.

Although, now she herself might be lost.

She had gone in the direction Georgie had indicated. But it didn't lead to a stairway. So she'd turned left at the curved hallway and then left again, and suddenly she was facing a dead end and had no idea how she had gotten here.

It was the strangest corridor. There was nothing in it. No doors, no windows. At the far end there was only a painting of a number of monks kneeling in prayer hanging on the wall. Although what they were kneeling before was a little suspect.

To Belinda's memory, the Virgin Mary was not, in general, depicted naked.

And what was that one monk doing with his hands? She leaned in closer, trying to see, when suddenly...

"Ow!"

The picture swung out and smacked her in the nose! How on earth...

"What –" Adam's head peeked around the back of the painting. "Belinda, what are you doing?"

"Looking for you," she replied, holding her nose. "And hopefully not bleeding."

"Let me see," he said, stepping out from behind the painting.

"No."

"Come on, now."

She swatted his hand away. "I'm fine. See?"

She blinked away reactionary tears as she removed her hand from her nose, praying that it looked normal. If it didn't, Adam said nothing. He merely lowered his hands, and held them behind his back.

"All right," he said, gruffly. "I take it you're lost too?"

"No," she replied automatically. "Or at least I wasn't. I was trying to find you."

"Were you now?" He leaned his shoulder against the opening of the passage behind him, practically purring. Although what the man was purring about, Belinda had no idea.

“Yes, rather against my will. Georgie feels your opinion is absolutely necessary for choosing desserts.”

“And you volunteered to find me. How did you know where to look?”

Who said anything about volunteering? she wondered. “I looked for the most ridiculous place a person could be, and I found you behind a painting of monks acting... unmonkly,” she replied flatly.

Adam cocked his head to one side, noticing the painting for the first time. “Oh. Well, then,” he said. “I didn’t really see that before. I found a secret hideaway.”

“Obviously,” she replied.

“Would you like to see it?” he asked.

She had to admit, she was tempted. It wasn’t every day that one happened upon a secret passage or cubbyhole or whatever it was. She peered into the dark behind him...

“Francesca and Georgie are waiting,” she said abruptly. “Besides I can’t imagine anyone I want to be in a secret hideaway with less than you.”

She turned on her heel, and headed back down the hall – if she took two lefts to get here, she need only take two rights and she’ll be back –

“Too frightening?” he called after her. “I never took you for a coward.”

She stopped. “I’m not frightened of secret passageways, Mr. Sturridge. Or of you.”

“Too tempting then?”

He wore the most peculiar grin on his face. One that made an errant blush spread from her chest down to... other places. What was he doing? Had he hit his head or some such thing?

“Too tempting to cause you grievous injury, perhaps,” she replied, tart as a lemon. “I’ve done my duty. I’ve located you, and I’ll tell Georgie that you were very happy in your explorations. Good day, Mr. Sturridge.”

She quickly trotted away to the sound of his chuckling, completely befuddled. It was just so *odd*. He barely bristled when she

gave him pointed set downs, had absolutely no interest in desserts, and was looking at her like a hunter looks at a deer.

Perhaps it was a case of spring fever. Yes, that must be it. Everyone had that feeling of restlessness and excitement as the weather began to change. In Adam, it simply manifested as a complete change of attitude and actions from the person she had known for the last fifteen years.

Surely, when he went back to not-Scotland, the fever would break.

These were the thoughts that occupied her brain as she with ease and precision retraced her steps and found her way back from whence she came. She thought she saw a flick of the curtains by the parlor door as she turned into the main hallway, but paid it no mind. In fact, she was so lost in her own thoughts that she almost didn't hear her friends' voices carrying out from where they took tea.

"Are you certain? Perhaps some beef broth?" Mrs. Clotworthy was saying. "Your brother would be so aggrieved if you took ill again."

"I'm *fine*, Mrs. Clotworthy, I promise." Georgie replied. Then, clearing her throat, "Now, Francesca, what were you saying? About Adam?"

"...Oh! Just that Adam's been so terribly unhappy lately. And my dear John says he knows why," Francesca replied, loudly.

Belinda stopped in her tracks. Peered her head around the doorway. Georgie and Francesca were deep in conversation, with Mrs. Clotworthy hovering around Georgie, worrying the fringe of her shawl. None of them took any notice of her.

"But Mr. Sturridge always seems to amiable," Georgie replied. "What reason could he have to be sad?"

"Oh, Adam hides it very well, behind a smile and a jest, but he's terribly sad to be leaving."

"But I thought he loved his estate in Scotland."

"It's not Scotland, and he does loves it. My darling John says he's found a purpose there that he had nowhere else. But it's what he'll miss here. Or rather, *who*."

"Of course he'll miss his family. You and Lord Sturridge and the

baby –”

“Not just us,” Francesca said. Belinda felt herself rooted to the spot.

“You don’t mean...” Georgie gasped. “But I was informed that they always hated each other!”

Immediately, the floor went out from under her. Or her knees did. Either way, she had to clutch the wall for support, and managed to bobble the Chinese vase on a pedestal that had suddenly appeared there. Luckily she caught it before it crashed, lest she be given away.

“It’s all making sense to me now,” Georgie was saying. “Didn’t he decide to stay longer all of a sudden?”

“Yes,” Francesca replied. “He did indeed.”

And he was acting strangely of late. Being in the same room as her. Watching her. Being not only nice to her, but if she wasn’t mistaken... *flirting* with her just now.

Flirting.

From Adam Sturridge.

“I cannot imagine the torment he is in, to be near and yet so far from his heart’s desire.”

“Um... yes, I suppose...” Francesca replied, somewhat doubtful.

“To not be able to declare himself for fear of ridicule! Oh, the agony he must be in!”

“I don’t know if *agony* is the right word –”

“It’s just so tragic. But we should speak of other things, lest our sadness show when they return,” Georgie sighed dramatically. “Come, what do you think of these marzipan treats?”

But Belinda was no longer listening. There was too much to work through.

Adam was acting strange.

Adam was acting strange because he was sad.

His sadness was caused by his having to go back north soon.

By leaving... her.

Because he loved her.

No matter how many times she repeated those sentences in her head, they still didn’t make any sense.

Unless...

Unless she had been wrong all these years, and was now only seeing it. Unless Adam Sturridge had always made the back of her neck prickle because of a reason other than annoyance.

Unless she felt something that she had denied, too.

No, no. She couldn't think on that now. Right now, she had to paste a smile on her face, and go back into that room, pretending she hadn't heard anything.

So that's exactly what she did.

"I'm so sorry, Georgie," she said as she swung into the room, entirely composed (or at least she hoped she was). "I have no idea where Adam is."

Georgie watched her closely, but then just shrugged. "It's no matter, I'm certain he'll turn up. Here, would you like to try a bit of this trifle? I think it glorious, but I'm afraid it might be too messy for such a crowded party."

As Georgie offered a slice of the treat, and smoothly Belinda took it, it was as if nothing had been said, or overheard. As if there had not been fainting twenty minutes ago. Indeed, as if the world was completely normal, spinning along as it always had.

Even though Belinda's world had ground to a complete stop.

And she hadn't a clue what to do about it.

Chapter Six

“What, precisely, are we supposed to be looking for?” Adam asked, pulling on his hat and gloves.

“Crocuses,” John mumbled, his mouth full of bacon, shoveling the last of his breakfast into his mouth as he likewise pulled on his heavy outer coat. “Francesca wants them for Miss Gage’s party.”

“The party’s not until Friday.”

“Yes, but Francesca is worried that last night’s snow is going to destroy them,” John sighed, as the butler opened the door for them. “She scattered the bulbs through the woods last year so they should be flowering by now.”

Last night winter had made one last attempt against the coming spring, and dropped a few inches of snow on their newly thawed ground.

“Just tell me, is there anything your wife can’t get you to do?” Adam asked, following his brother out the door. “Searching for crocuses, running back and forth between home and your government work in London... I’m simply curious about your limitations.”

John pulled up to a stop out on the front step, turning to him. “Adam, someday you will have a wife and you will realize that there is nothing you won’t do for her. Are you ready, my dear?” he called out, and for the first time Adam noticed Francesca standing in the drive in front of them.

Right next to Belinda Leonard.

“You kept us waiting for whole minutes,” Francesca said, giving her husband a loving peck on the lips. “It’s positively scandalous.”

It was the first time Adam had seen Belinda since she’d found him behind the painting of monks doing surprisingly non-celibate things. And he was finding it very hard to not think of those monks as he watched Belinda Leonard.

She carried a basket filled with garden tools, wearing a cloak over the blue gown that she'd worn a half dozen times in the last few weeks. He didn't know why he noticed that. Or why he'd taken notice of it in the past. Maybe because she looked particularly well in it, the cut of the gown elongating her form and the color bringing out the brightness of her skin.

"Adam?" Francesca was saying. "What do you think? Does the plan sound agreeable to you?"

"What was that?"

"I said we should split up, John and I will take the west side of the house, you and Belinda can take the east."

"Me and..." Adam stuttered.

"Me?" Belinda squeaked. It was the first word she uttered since he arrived.

"Is that all right?" Francesca asked. Then lower, to him. "I would go with you but John has no idea what crocuses look like. Besides, Belinda knows where we scattered the bulbs last year."

"No, that's fine," Adam said quickly, feeling the heat creep up his neck. "As long as you don't mind –" he said, turning to Belinda.

"No, I can... I mean, that's fine. It's of no importance."

"Right. No importance," Adam agreed swiftly. Then, clearing his throat, he held out his hand. "Well then.... shall we?"

She stared at his hand, unblinking, for the longest stretch of seconds Adam had ever been tortured by. Then she reached out, and put her basket of tools in his hand.

"We shall."

* * *

As they made their way through the copse of trees to the east of Sturridge Manor, Belinda regretted giving her basket to Adam. Not because she would have rather taken his hand in hers – no, of course not, that was far too silly. But because since he had her equipment, it meant that if she wanted to use said equipment, she had to keep pace beside him.

She couldn't run twenty feet ahead. She couldn't veer onto a different path, to cover more ground. No, she had to stay within

reach.

And being close to Adam Sturridge was not something she was prepared for that morning.

“I don’t see anything besides snow,” Adam said.

“They are purple flowers, a few inches off the ground,” she explained. “We scattered most of the bulbs just off the path, no more than six feet away.”

“Wait,” he said, coming to a halt. “What path?”

She, too, had to stop. “The path we are standing on right now.”

“There’s no path here,” he replied.

“Of course there is.”

“No – look.” He stepped three paces to the left on to the fresh snow.

“Stop!” she cried. “What are you doing?”

“Walking through the woods. Where there is no path.”

“You could be crushing crocuses!” She huffed out a breath. “There is a path, and it is right *here*.”

Adam sent her a look. “Belinda, I grew up here, and I’m telling you there is no path through these woods!”

“And I have walked through these woods for the past fourteen years, and I’m telling you, there’s a path, you’ve apparently just never paid any attention to it.”

“Apparently!”

“Yes apparently!” she retorted. “And apparently it’s not the only thing you haven’t paid attention to.”

His eyebrow went up. He stepped back towards her, coming to a stop so close to her she could see his breath.

“What else have I missed?”

Belinda sucked in her breath. But when she opened her mouth to speak, nothing came out. Her heart was beating too fast. Her mind muddled and racing.

The blame lay squarely in his eyes. His eyes, which previously she had always considered to be a rather dull greenish-brown she could now see were a mossy color, shot through with sparks of gold. And they way they looked at her... made her lose her courage.

“Just... crocuses!” she replied instead, her gaze falling with relief to his boots, and the hint of purple peeking up through the snow, mere inches from his boots.

She fell to her knees, and began pushing the snow back from the buds.

“Uh, Belinda?” came a voice from above. “What are you doing?”

“What we’re – oh.” She sat back on her heels and saw that she was eye-level with Adam Sturridge’s thighs.

Now, she was not an aficionado of the male form, but she had been to a museum in London once with her uncle as he conducted some business. On that trip, she viewed a number of Greek and Roman statues. For some reason, the thought filled her mind that Adam’s thighs were comparable with any of those statues. Just as well formed, and just as hard.

Really, this was becoming unseemly. This... distraction he was causing in her, simply by being there.

Or rather, by her being aware of it.

“I’m doing what we are suppose to be doing,” she said, stiffly. Somehow she found her voice and managed to make it sound as if she were completely unaffected. At least, that was the hope. “Keeping the crocuses from freezing. Are you just going to stand there, or help me?”

He jumped back, finally realizing that their awkward position could just as easily be remedied by his moving as it would by her. He turned three times, like a hound trying to find the best position, then knelt in the snow beside her.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” he said, as he handed her the little garden rake from her basket.

“What?” she asked, forcing herself to concentrate on the little purple flowers.

“It means we weren’t on your ‘path.’ Actually.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You are much more tolerable when you don’t have a triumphant tone in your voice.”

He grew still beside her. “So you find me tolerable?”

She turned and looked up at him. Her voice caught in her throat. “Rarely,” she finally managed, turning a particularly warm shade.

“But occasionally.”

“So... what are you doing?” he asked.

“Ah. I’m clearing the snow away from the flowers. So it can’t freeze the bulbs.”

“And is the guaranteed to work?” he asked.

“Honestly, I have no idea,” she replied. “Francesca sent me a note this morning and said it was an absolute necessity, so... here we are.”

He nodded. Then... nothing.

He just sort of... stayed there. Beside her. Kneeling on the cold ground.

“You could look for other flowers,” she offered. “We scattered the bulbs in groups.”

“Right,” he said, brightening. “I’ll... just go do that, shall I?”

Belinda did not hide her sigh of relief. She was glad that they had managed to not succumb to bickering, but without the bickering, there was only awkwardness. And awareness. Having him at a slight distance... yes, that was much better. That, she could handle.

“I found some!” he called out.

“Good,” she replied, not moving from her spot. “Just remove the snow from around them.”

“And the dirt too, correct?”

“What?” she stood. “No, not the dirt.”

“But –”

“But nothing – flowers need dirt, Adam.” She crossed to him immediately, and saw exactly what she expected. A trowel full of snow and dirt and a bulb practically shivering.

“Oh heavens, you’re doing it all wrong!” She bent to take the trowel out of his hand, but Adam pulled it away.

“I can do this perfectly well, thank you.”

“Obviously you can’t if your dragging up half the ground when you –”

“Would you stop?”

“Not until you –”

“Oh, for God’s sake, you can’t stop can you?” he cried, throwing the trowel to the side, which sank into a mound of snow, lost till the

thaw. "You can't stop correcting me and everything I do?"

Belinda met his eyes, her blood rising like a tidal wave.

"I don't do it to be mean," she countered. "But if things are done right the first time they aren't a problem later."

"Well that's me in a nutshell," he yelled. "A blunder to start with, and a problem now."

"Well thankfully, you're not *my* problem!" Belinda yelled back.

He took two steps, closing the gap between them. "You know you're acting awfully churlish for someone who is supposed to be in love with me."

For a moment, everything stopped. The rustling in the trees, the slight crunch of snow beneath her feet as her weight shifted, all went quiet as Belinda's ears heard the words he said, and her mind vaguely began to understand them.

She wondered if this is what going mad felt like.

"*What?*" she exclaimed. "*I'm* in love with you?"

He blinked at her. Twice. "Well..." he fumbled. "Yes."

"I'm not in love with you!" she replied, shocked. "You're in love with me!"

Now it was his turn to be shocked. His turn to rock back as if struck. "No I'm not! Miss Gage said you were in love with me! That's why you're setting your cap after Bertram."

"That doesn't even make sense!" she replied. "And I'm not setting my cap after Bertram Gage, and... and Georgie *and* Francesca said you were pining for me – that's why you delayed going back north!"

"Complete rubbish!" he cried, crossing his arms over his chest, and turning bright red. Then he began to pace. "So you're not in love with me."

"Of course not! And, er... you're not in love with me?"

"Absolutely not," he replied. "Right. Because if I had been in love with you, I would have certainly known it by now, I should think."

"One would hope." She nodded fervently.

"Yes, and if you had been in love with me, I should have known it too. But you've never given a damn about me at all."

"Now hold on –" she said, but was too busy talking himself into a

fine lather.

"I've been dirt beneath your boots ever since we met. I can't believe I –"

"Adam, I said hold on!" she said firmly, dragging his attention away from his own diatribe. "That's not fair."

"But it's true. Come now. Ever since we were children. You wouldn't even accept my apology about the bowls game."

Now she crossed her arms over her chest. "Excuse me, but you never apologized for that."

He pulled up short, turned to her. "Excuse me, I certainly did."

"No you didn't." she said. "You might have thought you did. You might have said it to John, or to Francesca, but the words were never said it to *me*. That is something I would have remembered, I can promise you that."

"Well, then I'm apologizing now," he said suddenly.

"For heaven's sake, why?" she threw up her hands. "It was so long ago, it doesn't matter."

"It seems to matter to you. So I apologize. For being a prideful idiot when I was twelve... through twenty-seven."

"Oh," she said. "Then... thank you."

They stood there, dumbly, for whole seconds.

"Well?" he finally said.

"Well, what?"

"Are you going to apologize for anything?"

"Like what?"

"Like... holding a grudge for so long that we couldn't be friends?"

"I never held a grudge," she said, shaking her head.

"Are you mad?" He threw up his hands.

"I didn't hold a grudge," she replied. "You just never liked me."

"Don't be ridiculous! Of course I liked you," he said, bewildered.

"I did. Your first ball, I asked you to dance."

"To make fun of me."

"No, to dance with you. Why on earth would it be to make fun of you?"

"Because it was a waltz, and you knew I didn't know how to

dance a waltz and you would just go back and make fun of me to all your regiment friends.” Her voice was hot, her face burning at the memory.

“I had no idea you didn’t know.” He replied. “How could I?”

“I...” she faltered. “I...”

“I couldn’t know that. And you turned me down so cruelly it stuck my feet to the ground for the rest of the evening – I didn’t dance with a single girl. And I had plenty of chances, you know, because I was wearing my red coat for the first time.”

“I remember,” she murmured.

“I thought... I thought that if you didn’t want to dance with me when I was in my uniform you never would. I liked you,” he said, moving to stand in front of her. “You just couldn’t see it.”

“And I liked you,” she replied, feeling something wet on her cheek. “*You* just couldn’t see it. I was so worried when you joined the regiment. I wrote you all the time.”

“I never got any letters,” he replied.

“Ladies can’t write unrelated gentlemen letters, Adam,” she sighed. “I sent you articles.”

“Articles? You mean those packets of clippings from ladies’ journals that came with John’s letters? About how best to darn socks and dry wool?”

“Yes, those!” she sniffled. “John included them in his letters for me.”

“So... you didn’t want me to have holes in my socks at war?”

“I didn’t want you to be shot either, but sparing that, I didn’t want you to be miserable.” Her sniffle turned into a little watery laugh. “And when you went to your estate in the north, I gave you that entire packet of articles about sheep herding, remember?”

“I... thought you were doing that to show me how much I didn’t know,” he said quietly. “How bad I’d be at it.”

“Of course you would think that. Because I’m Belinda Leonard and to you, I’m the girl who is controlling, and mean, and holds a grudge for fifteen years and... just annoys.” Her voice became little, and she shivered against the cold creeping through her cloak. “That’s

all I am.”

She couldn't take it anymore. She couldn't take the way he was looking at her, with such pity and confusion. She couldn't take the way she was feeling, lost and cold.

She couldn't take standing there any longer. So she didn't.

“Belinda, stop,” he said, as she moved past him.

They'd found enough crocuses, surely. Or if not, hothouse flowers would have to do for Georgie's party.

“Belinda, I –”

But she didn't stop. She didn't look back.

Not until she felt his hand catch her arm.

“What?” she said, turning. Her gaze caught his. He was startled. Struck.

“What?” she said again.

“I... oh, hell,” he breathed, pulling her to him.

And putting his lips on hers.

It was, without a doubt, the strangest experience of Belinda's life.

Not because the kiss was bad. Although she had no means by which to compare it, she had a feeling it was rather wonderful. But the odd thing about it was, she didn't feel it on her lips. Not at first.

She felt it at the base of her spine. That concave curve that usually held all her strength began to soften, become pliant. His hand managed to find that exact spot as he pulled her gently into him, and warmth spread across her skin.

Then, strangely, she felt it in her toes. Behind her ears. Her left elbow. All these places on her body, waking up for what felt like the first time, by the utter curiosity of his lips on hers.

And those lips, now that she could feel them, demanded things of her. Things she couldn't identify but was willing to give. Without knowing it she opened her mouth, gasping for a small bit of air.

He dove in. His tongue pleading for hers. His other hand caressed the back of her neck, catching the little tendrils of curls there and making her want to moan.

The entire event was one of the most unique in her admittedly sheltered life.

It was thrilling.

It was amazing.

It was... frightening.

Too frightening. Her heart beat too fast. Her body was too warm. And her mind... her mind kept asking one question over and over. *What on earth are you doing?*

This was *Adam*. Adam Sturridge. And somehow, somehow, she felt like something was breaking. Shifting.

And she couldn't let it.

"Stop," she said, pulling away. To his credit he did, blinking back into reality – back into the middle of the woods, in the middle of a cold morning.

"Belinda," he breathed. "I..."

"I should go," she said, immediately turning on her heel. *Run*, her mind told her. *Flee, as fast as you can.*

"Wait, we should talk –"

"There's nothing to say," she replied, scurrying away, propelled by her fear. "I must go."

And for once, he let her.

Chapter Seven

Adam was at a complete loss when Belinda left him in the middle of the east woods that cold spring morning. He was bewildered, bewitched, and befuddled too – not to mention concerned for her. But a small part of him could not help being relieved.

He needed to be alone with his thoughts. And it was obvious that he had lost the ability to think around Belinda Leonard.

He could only assume she had the same desire for time alone, because when he made it back to Sturridge Manor – after taking a long, *long* walk through the grounds and finding a grim appreciation in the morning's chill – it was to find that Belinda had already departed, leaving a concerned Francesca asking what had happened.

“Nothing,” he replied shortly. “Ah, we... we didn't find any crocuses.”

“Then why are your trousers all wet?” she asked.

He looked down. His buff-colored trousers bore the telltale dark spots of damp at his knees.

“Because I fell,” he answered distractedly as he moved past.

“Why did Belinda leave though? What on earth did you say to her?” Francesca kept pace with him, worrying her shawl. “We are supposed to meet Georgie and I don't know –”

“Haven't you and Miss Gage caused enough mischief lately?” he said, more brief than he had ever been in his life. And then, without a word, he pushed past a gaping Francesca and climbed the stairs.

He spent the rest of the morning in his rooms. Although, they weren't really his rooms. Not anymore. Although John and Francesca had both said they would always keep them just for him, he didn't live here now. He lived in just barely not-Scotland. He thought briefly of running. Just packing up his belongs, getting on his horse and heading north. In truth, he didn't even have to pack, he could have his things

sent to him. He honestly had no business still being here, and absolutely no business kissing Belinda Leonard.

Didn't he?

They had been tricked, that was it. Tricked into liking one another. A few days of wild fantasy, introduced by scheming matchmakers and blown far out of proportion by their own imaginations.

Which was why he'd been so eager to go on party planning trips with the ladies. Why Belinda had worn her blue dress today – because she knew she looked best in it, and wanted to appear at best advantage.

But wait... Belinda had worn that blue dress often in the months since he'd been there. Specifically, when she'd known he'd be at the house during her visits. If she truly hadn't liked him, she wouldn't have cared about appearing at best advantage.

And what about all the things she'd said to him in the woods. Things he'd considered a nuisance – her eagerness to help, to organize, to know how to do things right... she'd wanted to help *him*.

She'd wanted him to have dry socks during the war.

She'd wanted him to succeed at raising sheep.

And she tried to show him the right way to remove snow from crocuses. Not that he needed instruction of course, but for the first time he thought that maybe, maybe she didn't do it to aggravate him.

She did it because she cared.

And he'd cared too.

When John had first invited him to come down for the winter, he'd been excited. Of course he was eager to see his brother and Francesca and to meet the baby – not to mention avoid the worst of an almost Scottish winter. But what had made him rub his hands together with glee was the thought of seeing Belinda Leonard. Of finding ways to raise her hackles and make her look at him with those intense dark eyes. Of the fun he would have watching her cheeks pink and...

It all seemed so childish.

It was something a boy would do to hide his feelings. And he was well past his boyhood.

Maybe the prickling sensation that came over him every time he heard the click of her steps in the halls of Sturridge Manor was not anticipation of a skirmish of words, but anticipation of just seeing her.

The way her neck curved when she cocked her head to one side.

The way she looked to the left when she thought he was being an idiot but couldn't say anything in mixed company.

The way she looked to the right when she thought he had made a good point and had absolutely no idea how to respond to it.

The way she'd kissed him that morning.

He'd been lonely in not-Scotland. He'd been cold and working hard and spending most of his time with his land steward and sheep. Eighteen hours each day, his mind was on building the estate anew, but in those few moments before he drifted to sleep or blinked awake there was always a wisp of blonde hair drifting across his brain. A wry set of a perfect mouth.

Holy hell.

Just how long had he been in love with her?

Francesca and Miss Gage may have interfered, but they were not wrong. Not at all. In fact, they might have been the only people with working eyesight. Exactly when his annoyance turned to affection might not ever be known, there was a more pressing question.

Specifically, whether or not Belinda was in love with him.

And while, based on how she had kissed him back in those woods, he had a fairly good guess, the only person who could actually answer that, was Belinda herself.

So, the next morning, he crossed the east woods and headed up a small section of Main Street, then up the little lane to Croftburr, to ask her.

* * *

Belinda Leonard had absolutely no notion of how she got home after the crocus-saving mission was aborted. She couldn't cut across the east woods as she normally did, because that would have been retreading her steps, and putting her squarely in Adam Sturridge's path again. So she must have gone into the house, left a note for Francesca – or perhaps she saw her, she had no easy recollection – and

headed out on foot by the main drive. It would have taken her an extra half hour to make it back to Croftburr by that time, but at the speed she was walking, she likely made up the time.

Once there, she answered half a dozen inquiries from the housekeeper by rote (yes, they would be having the last of the salted pork for supper that evening; no, she did not want yellow tallow candles tonight) and immediately went up to her rooms to change.

She had her own garden to tend to – or at least, to supervise the removal of snow. Then she had to plan menus now that they had run out of the salted pork stores from the winter. Perhaps she should begin organizing the seasonal cleaning and airing out of the summer rooms a few weeks early.

There were a great many things to do, and she was not going to let one startling kiss from a person she'd never really considered kissing before take her off schedule. After all, she'd already let Georgie Gage and her party put her off schedule for the planning committee – why, the Hemshawe Fair was only a few short months away! No – she must not allow something so foolish to overturn her entire life.

It wasn't even just the kiss. It was everything she had said. A shocking flow of words that spilled out of her, without her realizing she had said them. Without realizing that she had felt that way.

It was just about the most embarrassing thing Belinda could imagine – and her imagination was very good. But as long as she went about things as normal, everything would be fine. And nothing would change. It would be like it never happened.

So she paid no mind when Francesca and Georgie each sent notes, wishing to inquire about her health.

She paid no attention when her uncle came down from his study, wondering why the solarium was being opened and aired out when there was still snow on the ground.

And she most certainly did not jump at every single knock or bump or errant noise made throughout the day.

Thus, it was after a night of very little sleep – because she was kept awake by making several lists in her head, and nothing more – that Belinda decided she was utterly in the right. As she was acting

like everything was normal, therefore everything was normal.

And she firmly believed that, right up until Adam Sturridge walked into her home.

She was in the breakfast room, tucking in to her plate of eggs and toast with her usual, normal gusto when the butler entered.

Sir Henry, Mr. Adam Sturridge is here to see Miss Leonard. I put him in the front drawing room.”

Belinda’s fork clattered to her plate.

“Mr. Sturridge?” her uncle replied, folding down his newspaper. His moustache twitched in amusement. “What have you done now, Bel?”

“Nothing.” Her voice did not sound like her voice. “Nothing at all. What ever do you mean?”

“You and Mr. Sturridge are always at odds. I reckon he’s here to squabble with you about something.”

“No, Uncle, I...” She clamored to her feet, pushing her plate away. “I cannot see him just now. I’m very late for... the Hemshawe Fair and Harvest Festival Committee. Pray, give Mr. Sturridge my excuses.”

She was out the door before her uncle could put up any protest, and six steps down the hall before she stopped herself. She couldn’t go up to her rooms this way – the front parlor was right by the main stairs. She doubled back and tiptoed up the servants’ staircase. And she was four steps away from her bedroom door when she stopped herself again.

She knew what her uncle was to tell Adam... but what was Adam going to tell her uncle? He wouldn’t mention what happened between them, would he?

No. Of course not.

Still, better to know than not.

Thirty seconds later she was crouched on the steps, hidden from view by the curve of the main staircase. And straining to hear the conversation taking place in the front parlor.

“...hardly seen you,” she heard her uncle say.

“Yes,” Adam replied, after a cough. “I’m a horrid neighbor for not

calling before now.”

“And you’re about to head back north, too!” Sir Henry replied. “I shall have to make Lord Sturridge invite us over for supper some time before you go.”

“The door is always open to you,” Adam replied. “No invitation necessary. And... and Miss Leonard too.”

“Something my Bel takes full advantage of,” her uncle said on a laugh. “Not that I blame her – it can get dull around here with just me for stodgy company.”

“I’m absolutely certain that’s not true,” Adam replied, good-naturedly. “But speaking of Belinda – er, Miss Leonard...”

“Yes, she’s sorry to miss you, but she’s had to run off for some kind of committee meeting. You know how she is about that sort of thing.”

“...I see.”

“She’s certain the town will fall apart without her. And this house, and me. And it’s likely true. Although...”

Belinda’s blood froze in her chest. ‘Although’ what?

“Yes, Sir Henry?” Adam asked for her.

“Well, I don’t want to speak out of turn, but I know you and my Bel have had your differences in the past, but I was so hoping you would have outgrown them by now.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” he replied. Belinda was not sure either, but she would be gratified to know. So gratified in fact, she shifted forward in her seat, and the stairs let out the longest, loudest creak in her memory.

She paused, as still as a deer in the woods. Listened, and prayed that two very specific people did not hear.

Her heart was pounding so fast she could barely hear her uncle when he started speaking again.

“You two have always brought out the worst in each other, but continuing to do so at your ages is silly, and judging by my niece’s reaction this morning, she knows it,” her uncle said. “Truth be told, I think she’s terribly embarrassed by whatever she did that has brought you here, and feels rightfully ashamed.”

All that frozen blood in her body suddenly dropped to the floor. She felt dizzy. She raised her hand to her head, and realized it was shaking.

“Ah,” she heard Adam say, his voice for once without that joking nature that usually irritated her. Without it, he sounded raw. And tired. “Actually, I have no quarrel with your niece. At least, not today. I... I simply wished to thank her. She sent me some materials about sheep herding a while ago, and I found them exceptionally useful. I read them cover to cover.”

“I’m certain she’ll be gratified to hear it,” her uncle said, his voice filled with a sad sort of pride. “I’ll be certain to tell her –”

“Pray, don’t trouble yourself, Sir Henry. It’s... it’s something I should tell her myself. I have no doubt I’ll see Miss Leonard at Sturridge Manor or in Hemshawe in the coming days.”

As her uncle tried to entice Adam to stay and talk about his estate and his sheep, and Adam firmly but politely declined, Belinda snuck back up the stairs on her tiptoes, careful to avoid the creaks. She had no need to hear anymore.

Yes, she and Adam had been fighting far too long. It was silly, and she was mortified her uncle felt the need to apologize to Adam for her behavior.

But she couldn’t think about that.

Nor could she think about how Adam had sounded – so eager at first and then so sad. Nor what he’d said – did he really read her sheep herding pamphlets? No, she could only focus her mind on one single thing.

Adam thought he would be able to run into her in the coming days, before he left for his estate. To – one assumed – *talk*.

Not if Belinda could help it.

Chapter Eight

Adam would give Belinda this – when she put her mind to something, that something was accomplished. Whether it was helping her friend put a ball together in the space of ten days, or successfully avoiding Adam for the last three.

Adam thought he would be able to corner Belinda at some point, and... well, he wasn't quite certain what they would do in that corner, but he knew a conversation needed to be had. After his disappointing interview with her uncle, Adam knew Belinda was avoiding him, but he never thought she'd be this good at it in a place as small as Hemshawe. But every time he happened to show up to whatever committee meeting or food-tasting session Francesca told him was on the ladies' schedule for the day, he discovered that Belinda was not there. She was off contracting with the butcher for the right cuts of meat or had driven into Tunbridge Wells to audition musicians with tubas.

On the third day, he decided to circumvent her scheme. When he oh so casually asked Francesca over breakfast what the day held for her and Belinda, she told him they would be directing the Sturbridge gardeners just what flowers were to be culled and arranged for Georgie's party, Adam knew without a doubt that Belinda would not be crossing the threshold of Sturbridge Manor.

So, he camped out in the middle of Hemshawe. From the center of town, he was easily able to see the whole of Main Street while enjoying a delightful ham luncheon in the front window of the Joyful Shepherdess, the village pub.

The whole day passed. Everyone was out, as the weather had broken, and spring proved triumphant over the winter. Everyone that is, except for Belinda Leonard. After hours of seeing neither hide nor hair of her, he headed back to Sturridge Manor in defeat, only to be

greeted by Georgie and Francesca with the news that he just missed Belinda.

But she could not avoid him here, at the party of her own creation.

The Friar's House was done up in spring flowers and gauze bunting. The entire town of Hemshawe had turned out for what was supposed to be a small gathering for dinner and dancing. Likely half of Tunbridge Wells, too. And in the center of it all was Belinda Leonard.

She was surrounded by people. Francesca, Miss Gage, Bertram, and Mrs. Clotworthy of course, but there were also Mrs. Frosham and her two sons, a pair of redheaded cousins from Tunbridge Wells who always competed over horses and women, and even a naval officer in his blue coat. Really, far too many men for Adam's comfort. All standing around Belinda like a wall.

Oh hell. Pinning her down was going to be even harder here than it had been the last three days.

But he had to try.

He elbowed his way through the room, nearly getting smacked by an enthusiastic quadrille dancer, before squeezing past the vicar and putting himself right next to Belinda.

She looked lovely – bright-eyed, flushed with the success of the party. Her golden hair was pinned back with one long curl running over her shoulder, and a midnight blue silk made her skin glow. She was writing something in her dance card with neat little letters. He was so struck by finally being near to her, after days, he forgot what he was going to say for just a moment.

But a moment was all it took for him to hear Belinda say, “thank you, Mr. Frosham, I would be delighted, but it looks like I have given the last of my dances away!”

The younger Mr. Frosham looked pitifully downcast (as did his mother), but Adam was more alarmed. “Your dance card is full?” he blurted out. “Already?”

The wall of people around them turned to look at him. He felt his face flaming, while Belinda went pale.

“My apologies, Mr. Sturridge – Mr. Gage, you have my first two,

and the music is beginning. Shall we?"

As Bertram gave her his arm and lead her away, the rest of the circle, sending him looks ranging from amused to concerned, began to dissolve. Leaving Adam on the outside – again.

He spent the next hour watching Belinda, hoping for an opening. But she proved to be as wily as a cat. When she wasn't dancing, she would travel to the ladies' retiring room with three other women – a fearful blockade against any man's intentions. When the dancing was suspended so supper could be served, she was seated at the very opposite end of the table... a fact he shouldn't be surprised by, as Belinda was the one who made the seating arrangements.

He was beginning to worry that their few minutes in the woods were the only minutes they would ever spend together when, after dinner, he chose a very lucky chair.

"Mr. Sturridge – what are you doing on wallflower row?"

Adam started, turning to find Miss Georgie Gage two seats to his right, Mrs. Clotworthy beside her.

"Wallflower row?" he asked. Aside from himself, Miss Gage, and her lightly snoring companion, there was no one seated. Everyone else was on the dance floor.

"Yes – Bertram doesn't want me dancing too much. He's afraid I'll exhaust myself. So here I sit. Lonely, but now no longer alone."

"I would be happy to dance with you," Adam replied. "And we can tell your brother to go hang."

Georgie smiled. "Thank you, but no. I enjoy watching people enjoy themselves... Miss Leonard is dancing with my brother again."

"I know," he said, his eyes narrowing. "But then again, you knew that I knew that, didn't you?"

Miss Gage had the grace to blush. "Francesca told me you were upset by our interference."

"I was."

"Then I apologize. I thought... well, it doesn't matter what I thought. But Bertram is always annoyed by my meddling." An elbow landed squarely in her side. "Oof. And Mrs. Clotworthy, too."

"I was annoyed. But I am more annoyed by your abandoning of

it.”

She turned to him, incredulous. Even Mrs. Clotworthy seemed to wake up.

“If you are intent on meddling –”

“I’m not,” she said.

“She is,” Mrs. Clotworthy answered.

“Then meddle in my favor for once, and help me now.”

She leaned in close, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. “How?”

Adam marched across the room, the crowds parting for him as if diving out of the way of a stampede. He was at Belinda’s side just as the first notes of the waltz began.

Her back was to him, else she might not have let him so close. “Belinda,” he said.

Her shoulders froze. Then, she rolled them back, and turned.

“Mr. Sturridge.” She kept her head high, a tight smile on her features.

“May I have the honor of this dance?” he asked.

“I... I would,” Belinda said politely. “But I’m afraid this dance is promised to –”

She looked in her dance card, and frowned.

“This waltz isn’t in your dance card, Belinda. It was only just added to the programme. It isn’t promised away.” He held out his hand to her.

Held her eyes.

“Dance with me. This time, I won’t take no for an answer.”

* * *

They took their places on the floor. No one else seemed to be thrown by the insertion of a random waltz into their carefully planned dancing order, and around them everyone began swirling in time to the music.

So Belinda and Adam had little choice but to do the same.

“I’m not going to bite you,” Adam said. “You can relax.”

“I know that,” she replied, sharply.

“Then perhaps put your hand on my shoulder?”

“Oh.” She brought her hand up and placed it as lightly as possible on the broadcloth of his coat. Then, his right hand came to that warm spot at the base of her spine, and his left took her free hand in his.

And then they were dancing.

Oh, this would be so much easier if she didn’t have to touch him! If she couldn’t feel the heat of him through his coat. If she wasn’t practically vibrating beneath his hands. She was wearing gloves, for goodness sake. It wasn’t as if they were naked.

And that thought caused her stumble ever so slightly.

“Are you all right?” he asked, catching her and righting their steps before anyone could notice.

“I’m fine. Fine.”

“I’m sorry, I thought you would know how to waltz by now.”

“I do!” she replied. “I’ve been dancing all evening.”

“I know you’ve been dancing. And going to the retiring room with thirty other women by your side. And running errands to Tunbridge Wells for three days. All to hide from me.”

“I... I was not hiding,” Belinda replied. “I had a great deal to do for this party –”

“Belinda. You know we must talk.”

“Must we?” she replied. “I don’t think there’s anything to say, really.”

He swung her into a turn, setting her heart racing. When her eyes came up to his, she didn’t see anger, or alarm. She only saw Adam.

Oh, heavens. This was going to be harder than she thought.

“We spoke, Mr. Sturridge.” She said, clearing her throat. “We spoke, and we... we perhaps said things that we’d both been thinking –”

“Not just thinking. Feeling.”

“—but now that those thoughts and emotions have been expressed, it’s over. It’s something that happened, but we need not dwell on it.” She put her chin up, looked down her nose at him. “You can go back to Scotland, and my life will be normal as ever.”

He came to a stop in the middle of the dance floor. Everyone still swirling around them, judiciously stepping out of the way... and

trapping Belinda in with Adam.

He didn't let go of her. He didn't step back. He just let his hand slide out of hers, and lightly caressed it down the length of her glove, finding her skin just above the elbow.

"No," he said. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

His fingers burned indelible marks into her skin. She couldn't look away from that hand. But she had to – it was too much. She let her eyes slide to the other dancers, and saw that they were all spinning, and whispering... and looking at her.

"Adam," she said, her face burning. "We can't... *I* can't..."

His voice was a low rumble in her ear. "Why not?"

"I..." There was no answer to give. She was in the middle of the dance floor in the Friar's House while the entire town of Hemshawe watched. "I can't be here anymore."

She pulled back, and nimbly ducked beneath dancing partners, fleeing the room. And she knew without turning back that Adam was right on her heels.

"Belinda," he said, as they passed from the main room into one of the corridors.

"Why can't you just be mean to me?" she shot back, her eyes threatening tears – which would just be horrid.

"Mean to you?" he asked, half a step behind her.

"Yes. Can't you just make a trite remark about my dress or the party, and I can make a snide reply and everything will be normal?"

"No," he said. "I can't. I won't let you do that."

"Do what?"

"Pretend. I won't let you pretend there was nothing between us. That there *is* nothing between us."

Why couldn't he understand? She had been prepared to meet him here tonight. She knew she could not avoid him entirely. So she would act cold and standoffish, and in turn he would be sarcastic and brittle, and that she could handle. She knew all the steps of that dance. But this Adam – being gentle with her, and open, yet still standing firm... *this* Adam was an unknown. And she had no strategy for how to fight against him.

"I just... oh hang it! I cannot *think* with you here," she cried, turning down another corridor.

If only she could get *away*. Away from him, away from here, away from people. But every time she turned a corner there were party guests, or servants, or couples hiding in corners. There was no space to even breathe!

As if sensing her discomfort Adam took her arm, whispering "come with me," before guiding her into a new hallway, one that was vaguely familiar.

Belinda barely caught a glimpse of overheated monks on their knees before Adam swung the painting back, and pulled her into the dark beyond it.

The very dark.

"I can't see a thing," she said, feeling the walls and praying Georgie had thought to have the secret passages cleaned before the party.

Although, from what she could tell, it wasn't really a passage, as Adam had previously described. It was more of a niche... an honest-to-goodness priest hole.

And as her hands crossed from cold stone to Adam's warm frame, she discovered it was a decidedly small one.

"I'm not here," he said.

"I beg to differ," she replied.

"No, I mean... you can't think when you're around me? I have the same problem. So, pretend I'm not here. You cannot see me. You are alone." He took a deep breath. "So tell me what is wrong."

"Nothing is wrong."

"You would lie even to yourself?" he asked, the smirk evident in his voice.

"All right then," she said, letting all artifice fall away. There was no use for it in the dark. "We *kissed*, Adam. That's what's wrong."

"You think it was wrong? It felt very right to me."

"Of course it's wrong! Does it make any sense to you? Any sense at all that *you* and *I* would be kissing in the woods?"

"It didn't make much sense before it happened," he admitted.

“But afterward it made all the sense in the world.” She could feel him stepping closer. “Like a puzzle piece that was turned the wrong way. Turn it around and everything clicks into place.”

She felt herself turning like that puzzle piece, shifting ever so slightly to match him.

No. She shook her head ruthlessly. Not allowed.

“It’s too strange,” she replied, crossing her arms over her chest, and disconcertingly grazing his coat.

“Too strange...” he mused. “You mean, too different?”

“Yes!” she cried. “This isn’t fair, you know. Everything was normal and fine and then suddenly little birdies named Georgie and Francesca dropped hints in our ears that we are in love with each other, and suddenly I’m supposed to be in love with you. And I don’t know how to do that and I don’t even know if I want to!” She felt like everything was spilling out of the center of her chest, but she dare not stop it. “Is that too much to ask that I have some small say in my life? My parents died when I was nine and everything changed. Since then I have worked very hard to arrange things very much how I like them. And now you want to change it and I...”

Her voice died, and silence echoed in its place. The dim noise from partygoers walking up and down the hall was drowned out by the beating of her own heart. By the painful weight of her confession.

“Things have already changed between us,” he finally whispered. “It happened a long time ago. And it wasn’t one big shift. It wasn’t Georgie and Francesca. It happened an inch at a time, over years. It just took us this long to see the road we had traveled clearly.

“I knew you were scared,” he said. “But I couldn’t figure out why you would be scared of me. God knows, if I had upset you in some way, you would have taken my head off with a single set down. But I didn’t realize until now that you have been scared for the last fourteen years.”

His hand found that loose tendril of her hair, and he lightly wound it around his finger. Her eyes lifted, searching the dark for his face.

“You were scared when we first met, because you were new to

the neighborhood and your parents had died, and you wanted to be liked and needed friends, and I mistook it for being a bossy know-it-all. You were scared of not being taken seriously at your first ball. You were scared when I left for war, and even more scared when I came back. And you were scared when we kissed.”

She his hand lifted from her hair to the line of her jaw. Her arms, crossed over her chest, fell to her sides.

“You’re afraid of what will happen if we let things change. But Belinda, I’m afraid of what will happen if we don’t.”

And then... he couldn’t say anything more. Because somehow, his lips had found hers in the dark.

Or was it the other way around? Belinda didn’t know. All she knew was that comfortable uncomfortableness, that delightful drugging settled over her skin and she didn’t want to think anymore. Her mind surrendered to the dark, and her body took over. And her body only wanted to feel.

It acted against every good objection her mind might have offered. Her arms came up, wrapped themselves around his neck. Her fingers found their way into his hair. Her breasts, entirely of their own volition, pressed against the broad expanse of his chest.

His hands pulled her to him, traveled up and down the length of her back, smoothing the silk. Gathering it in his hand. The cool air danced against her calf, then her thigh. Then his touch warmed her there.

And her body wanted nothing more than to let him explore. And to explore in turn.

There was a desperation to him, banked by what must have been an iron will. But as they teased each other with little bites and exploring fingers, some of that will must have crumbled because there was one thing he could not hold back.

“I love you.”

He whispered the words into her ear, and they floated into her brain. They echoed there, waking up her mind like a kernel of light, growing and expanding, showing the little priest hole – and what they were doing in it – in all its garishness.

She froze. Her mind panicked. That wasn't what she wanted. That was too much at once – too uncontrollable.

His mouth lifted from her neck as he felt her still. "Belinda?" His voice was hoarse with want.

"I... I'm sorry." She said, quickly disentangling herself from him.

Then she threw open the painting, shining harsh light into the little room, and ran.

Again.

Chapter Nine

“There you are, Bel! We’ve been waiting ages!”

Belinda blinked as she entered Croftburr’s front parlor. Her uncle sat across from Francesca and Georgie, who were all enjoying morning tea, complete with scones and sandwiches enough to stuff a regiment.

Although, was it even morning anymore? Belinda glanced at the mantle clock... good heavens, was that the time?

“I’m sorry,” she croaked out, surprised at the hoarseness of her own voice. “I overslept.”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” Georgie cajoled. “What with last night’s excitement.”

“Excitement?” her voice cracked again.

“The party, of course!” her uncle laughed. “You really are fog-brained today, aren’t you, Bel?”

Yes, she was fog-brained. But not because of the party. She’d actually left the party somewhat early, claiming a headache once she returned to the ballroom and making her way to the carriages. Her uncle had left an hour earlier, so she had deftly avoided him when she arrived home, and tiptoed up to her room.

Where she laid awake.

For hours.

Her mind and body remained at war – the former wanting to understand why the latter had betrayed every good intention she had regarding Adam Sturridge, and the latter needing sleep.

She spent far too much time cringing into her pillow and rehashing every single word, and touch, and moment that occurred in the dark of that priest hole. Dawn was lighting the sky before her exhaustion finally won and she drifted to a fitful sleep.

And now, having woken late and decidedly irked that the new day did not bring her wondrous clarity, she had to face her uncle

hosting her friends for tea.

“I suppose I am fog-brained,” she replied, seating herself in the chair opposite her uncle as Francesca played host and poured her a cup of tea. “And you’ll have to forgive me, but I don’t recall us having planned to meet today.”

“Only you would think we came because we had a committee meeting!” Francesca laughed.

“We are here because I am distributing last night’s leftovers to the neighborhood,” Georgie said. “Cook made about twice as much food as even my staff could eat, and it would be a shame to let it go to waste.”

“I thought it delightful!” Francesca added. “She stopped at Sturridge Manor first, and I decided to join her on her mission. I was more than happy to get out of the house too – what with Adam turning the place upside down in his haste.”

Belinda, who had only been half listening, suddenly paid attention.

“Why such haste from Mr. Sturridge today?” her uncle asked, before she could.

“Packing. He’s decided to begin his journey back north tomorrow, and the entire household must be at his command,” Francesca said, rolling her eyes.

“What?” Belinda asked abruptly.

“Yes, he’s leaving first thing in the morning. He said he only stayed this long because he wanted to see the Gages established in the neighborhood before he left.”

“Well, isn’t that a shame!” Sir Henry replied. “I was just saying the other day I’d not had the chance to catch up with the young man this winter, and suddenly he’s leaving. Such a pity – isn’t it Bel?”

Belinda’s mouth went dry. “But he... he can’t leave.”

The familiar panic began to rise in her chest. But, no... it wasn’t familiar. There was something different about this panic. It didn’t make her want to run. It rooted her to the spot.

“Why should he not?” Georgie asked, gently. “It was kind of him to stay as long as he did, but he has his estate, sheep to ready for

spring sheering, a dozen reasons to go.” She eyed Belinda with open concern. “What reason does he have to stay?”

The words sunk under Belinda’s skin, weighed heavy against her heart. “I... I beg you to excuse me.”

And with that, she left her uncle, her oldest friend, and her newest friend in the middle of her front parlor without another word.

The day before yesterday, this news would have been met with relief. Or at least, that’s what she thought she would have felt. But now... now she was no longer able to blame it all on a random act of sentiment, and the inherent romance in hunting for crocuses shoots in cold, wet snow. Or on Georgie and Francesca’s interference. Ever since last night she’d been unable to push down her feelings and pretend normalcy. And now, with the news that normalcy was about to return with Adam leaving... a strange heaviness invaded her chest. As if her heart were breaking. But how was that possible. She was the one who walked away, unsure of herself. Not Adam. It was as if...

As if she was breaking her own heart.

Belinda was halfway down the hall to her rooms when the thought of entering them – of tossing and turning on the same bed as last night, of pacing the same ten feet of carpet – was suddenly abhorrent. She needed to be anywhere but here.

She left the house through the kitchens, drawing eyes but no words from the servants there. She didn’t know where she was walking, but let her feet take her where they may.

They trod a familiar path, and led her to where her thoughts were – Sturridge Manor.

Or rather, the woods she cut through regularly to get there.

It was warm again – warm enough that she didn’t miss the shawl she’d forgot to bring. And warm enough that the crocuses that only days ago had been covered in snow, were now in full bloom.

She stopped, and stared at those crocuses, for how long she couldn’t say.

They pushed through the snow. They could have retreated at that last snowfall. They could have dived back into the ground, where it was safe and warm.

But then, they wouldn't be flowers.

She looked up, and saw the gray stone of Sturridge Manor through the still naked trees.

Belinda knew in an instant what she had to do.

She had a chance – a small one – to push through the snow. And she had to take it.

Before it was too late.

* * *

If Adam were to rank the days of his life from best to worst, today would be very near the bottom. Not the absolute bottom – that was reserved for his time in the war. But for a perfectly lovely day in spring where no one was shooting at him, it was absolute hell.

It had taken Adam approximately ten minutes after Belinda ran away from him last night to decide that he needed to go back north to his estate. Hemshawe, his home for so long, no longer felt as such. It was time to go.

He'd kissed Belinda Leonard twice. And she'd run from him twice. Adam knew himself to be less than observant when it came to matters of the heart, but really, how many clues did he need?

Two, apparently.

Hell, he'd even told her that he loved her.

He would have left this morning, if it had been at all possible. And he would leave now, if it wasn't pitch black out and he wasn't exhausted.

He entered his bedroom, ready to collapse. The room was lit only by the fire in the grate. His valet had long been sent to seek his own bed – he would need his rest for the journey in the morning too. And Adam... well, Adam had just wanted to forget.

Francesca had returned home that afternoon and tried to corner him, but he didn't want to listen to anymore meddling, or apologies for it. He spent the day seeing that his horse was well rested and newly shod. Making certain that all his trunks were properly packed, that he had coin ready for the journey, and ensuring that Little Johnny would remember his uncle Adam until the next winter, when he would no doubt flee the cold of Not Scotland again.

Although, perhaps he wouldn't, he thought, as he sat on the bed and pulled off his boots and stockings. Perhaps he wouldn't be able to face Hemshawe, and one resident in particular, for a while.

He could only hope that he had tired himself out enough to sleep as he pulled his shirt over his head. Tomorrow was going to be a long, hard ride.

"I think now might be an opportune time to make myself known."

He froze with his shirt halfway up, covering his face.

Suddenly he was very, very awake.

"If you're trying to decide whether to pull the shirt up or pull it down, my preference is for the former."

He choked – either on a laugh or on his shock. Then he obliged, pulling the shirt up off his head and tossing it aside. His eyes cast about in the dark of his room, finally settling on the heavy leather chair he kept in the corner.

"Belinda." He said, straightening his shoulders. "How did you get here?"

"I walked," she replied. Her hair was in a loose braid, slung over her shoulder. She wore a plain, practical gown. She looked as relaxed and at ease as he'd ever seen her.

Except for her eyes. Her eyes gave her nerves away.

"No. I meant, how did you get into my room."

"I spend half my time in this house, Adam. You think I didn't know which room was yours?"

"If anyone saw you..."

"No one did."

"Still, if they –"

"Adam, honestly," she said, rising from the chair. "When did you become so missish?"

"Around the time I discovered Belinda Leonard in my room."

She smiled nervously. Adam knew that whatever reason she was here, whatever happened next, he needed to do everything in his power to not muck it up. So he decided it was in his best interest to stand, very, very still as Belinda moved gingerly to the fire.

"You know, this isn't the first time I've been in your room," she

said, as she gazed into the fire.

“Really?”

She nodded. “You were off at school, and my uncle was paying a call on your father. I was sent to go fetch a book from your father’s study and I ended up here.”

“And was your curiosity satisfied?” he asked.

“Disappointingly no.” She shrugged, staring into the fire. “It was just a normal room. I think I expected you to have a lair or a dungeon.”

“Belinda, is this why you came here tonight?” he asked, leaning his shoulder against the bedpost. “To reminisce about the past?”

Her shoulders tensed, her back went as straight as a pin. Ah, there was the Belinda he knew.

“No,” she replied before turning to face him, the fire framing her silhouette. “I came to talk about now.”

He waited. Forced himself to breathe evenly and not reach for her.

“You said something to me last night.”

“That I’m in love with you,” he stated plainly.

“Two things, then.” She took a deep breath. “You said you couldn’t fathom why I was scared of you. And I’m not. I’m scared of myself. For myself.”

He chanced taking a step closer to her.

“I’m scared... of how you make me feel. Because I can’t control it.”

He nodded, slowly, chancing another step forward.

“As long as things are in my control, I’m not scared. Does that make sense?”

Her eyes rose to meet his. All the distance between them seemed to melt away.

“In spite of our history, you know I would never hurt you,” he breathed. “I would never want to put you in a situation that made you feel afraid... and I apologize if I have.”

“I know,” she nodded.

“Mostly because I know you would come after me with a saber if I

did, but...”

She smiled and swatted his chest. He caught her hand and held it there. He could feel her pulse skittering beneath his hand. Her eyes fell to where they were connected, skin to skin.

“I... I think I know of a way to be less afraid.” She said, a tremor sneaking into her voice. “I was thinking about it all afternoon and... I’d like to try an experiment.”

“I’ll do anything you want.”

“Good,” she nodded, lifting her gaze to his. Her eyes glowed.
“Take off your trousers.”

Chapter Ten

“My trousers?”

Belinda nodded, holding onto her resolve with both hands. Now that she was here, now that she had said it, she couldn’t take it back. Not even the surprise on Adam’s face would deter her in her quest to... to leap forward.

She just had to do it in her own way.

“You did say you’d do anything I asked.”

His head cocked to one side. A slow smile lifted the corner of his mouth. “Yes, I did.”

“I’ve been sitting here in the dark for an hour,” she straightened her spine, “and I decided that’s what I wanted.”

“You’ve been sitting here for an hour?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“That must have given you a lot of time to think. I wonder...” he leaned in his breath warm on her cheek. “Did you decide you wanted other things too?”

“...some. Possibly.” Her voice might have shaken a little. But she held her ground. “But first... your trousers.”

“Your wish is my command.”

She watched as his thumbs slid under his waistband, his fingers nimbly flicking open the buttons. The trousers slid away easily. He stepped out of them, kicked them to the side, leaving him only in his smallclothes.

“Good.” Belinda nodded once. “Good.” *Good?* She sounded like a complete imbecile.

She felt like one too, asking a man to remove his clothes, and playing the kind of woman who knows things, all the while trying very hard to look anywhere but at Adam Sturridge’s impeccable body.

And it was impeccable. He’d always worn his coat well, but she

had to assume that the war and then the last two years of working hard, cold land had shaped him into something glorious. Hard planes across his chest, shoulders that rounded and sloped like they did on Greek statues. And there was a slight gap between his flat stomach and the white of his smalls and she found herself endlessly curious about what she might find in that shadow...

“Well?”

Her head shot up. “Yes? I mean... what?”

“Well... what now?” he asked.

“Oh. I... I thought you might be able to tell me –”

But he shook his head.

“Belinda, you are in control. We are not going to do anything, unless you desire it.” His eyes darkened, sending her pulse racing. “Now, you’ve spent an hour, in the dark, pondering all the different things you could ask of me. So... tell me what you want.”

She took a deep breath. She brought her hand up, let her fingers dance along his collarbone.

“I... I want you to kiss me.”

His grin spread wide, turning feline. “Finally,” he breathed, and brought his lips down to hers.

Relief swelled through her as he swept her up in his arms. He pressed his body against hers, lifting her to her toes. Then, it wasn’t relief she felt anymore. Awareness spread from her belly all the way out to the tips of her fingers. The top of her head. The peaks of her breasts. She let herself give in to her feelings, give in to him as his tongue delved into her mouth.

And it made the awareness zip through her blood anew.

Suddenly, she was no longer standing on her toes. Instead, her feet were in the air and her legs were taken out from under her, as she was lifted in Adam’s arms.

“Oh my,” she said, shakily. “I never thought up this.”

“Does it displease you?”

“Quite the contrary.”

“Excellent,” he smiled. “Glad I can expand your imagination. I thought we might be more comfortable over here.”

It was then she realized they had crossed the room and come to the bed. “That... is acceptable,” she replied.

With reverence, he placed her down on the bed. Laid down next to her.

“What next, Bel?” He kissed each of her fingers. “What do you want now?”

“I want to feel your skin,” she purred.

He held his arms wide. “Feel away.”

“No, I want to feel your skin against mine,” she clarified.

“Ah,” he replied, his eyebrow shooting up. “Well then you are decidedly overdressed.”

“I think that should be taken care of.”

He nodded. “As you wish.”

He worked the buttons at her back with ease, his eyes never leaving hers. The cool air hit her back. They sat up and her gown came over her head with one swoop, and then his hands – his glorious hands – caressed her shoulders. His fingers looped under the ties of her chemise.

“Still a bit too much in the way, I think.”

He slid the ribbons down her arms as his lips came to her neck.

Intoxicating. That’s what this feeling was. She’d had three glasses of wine once playing cards with Francesca, and had become quite giddy. She felt the same giddiness sliding across her body now, making her hum with delight and lose track of time. For instance, she had no idea when her corset had come off. Nor did she know when he’d rolled her stockings down. Although she did recall the line of kisses he placed down her calf.

And when her chemise finally fell to the floor, joining his smalls, she was at a complete loss as to how it happened. But now that her body was under his, and she could feel the heat coming off of his skin, the pressure of his weight, the hardness against her leg... she *gloried* in it.

“What now, Belinda?” he asked, his voice a rumble of desire.

“What do you want now?”

“I... I don’t know what comes next.”

His head came up. "I am somewhat relieved to hear it."

"Adam..." she blushed, squirming in embarrassment.

"May I offer my assistance?" he said.

"How?"

"I could ask you if you like... this." His head lowered to her breast, and he took her nipple in his mouth.

"Yes," she gasped.

"Yes what?" he mumbled.

"Yes, I like that."

"Good. Now... do you like this?" His tongue found her belly button, his hands ran down the length of her thighs.

"Yes."

"And what about this?"

Hands slid up further to her warmest, most hidden part. She arched in surprise.

"Yes," she whimpered, as his fingers delved into her slick wetness.

Her entire body buckled. She wanted to cry out, to scream, to melt against him.

"Shhh..." he said, coming up to let his mouth claim hers. "You'll wake the house."

She struggled to keep quiet as she struggled to keep herself whole. But his damned hand was all too clever, knowing exactly how to tease her, to set her wanting... more.

He kissed her. She kissed him back harder. She let her hands slide over his arms, his back, finding the way to her own breasts, aching for sensation.

Belinda," his voice was ragged against her ear. "What do you want?"

"You," she cried. "I want you."

That was all he needed. Suddenly, that hardness that had been pressed against her leg sat at the opening of her body. She reached down, felt it slick and smooth in her hand.

He let out an incomprehensible whimper at her touch.

"Bel, are you sure?" he asked, his voice strained.

"Yes. Yes, Adam I love you."

There was nothing more to be said. Nothing more to ask of him. He gave her everything he had, inch by tantalizing inch. She gasped as heat lanced through her, then pain. But it settled and dissipated. And then... everything changed.

Every nerve in her body awoke to the place where they touched, where they joined. Every time he moved, she moved with him, her muscles straining with the newness of it all. New, but right, and good. She wanted everything, and wanted for nothing at the same time.

The delightful pressure began to build in her belly again. It was like a strange desire to fly off in several different directions at once. And suddenly, she found something new she wanted. She wanted to follow that feeling, wherever it lead her.

“Yes. Yes my love, that’s it.” His voice floated into her head through harsh breaths. She clasped her legs around his waist, let him pump and push and pull everything out of her until...

She fell apart in a thousand pieces. She arched her back, crying out. He only managed to catch her gasp with his kiss just in time. And suddenly, he was gasping, and holding her tight, and losing himself inside of her.

He let his weight fall against her body, and she welcomed it.

There was nothing else she wanted.

“Are you all right?” he breathed after a time.

“Yes,” she nodded, then frowned. “No.”

“No?” His head came up, alarmed. “I hurt you, didn’t I? Bel, I’m so sorry, but it won’t hurt again – at least that’s what I’ve been told...”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just... I thought I could control how I felt. I thought this would be a way to make it all less frightening.”

He smoothed a lock of hair off her brow. “And was it frightening?”

“No. At least not how you think, so stop making such a worried face. It was just very different from what I imagined. It’s entirely wonderful, but entirely uncontrollable.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “And is that so terrible? Being out of control?”

She shifted her weight underneath him, felt him stir. “I admit,

every now and again I would not mind it.”

He smiled fully, and pressed his forehead against hers. “I’m very glad to hear it. Since we’ve already done ‘now’, would you care to try for ‘again?’”

* * *

Dawn touched the sky as Adam and Belinda walked silently through the woods, his cloak wrapped around her shoulders, and her hand in his. He snuck her out of Sturridge Manor before the servants got up to light the fires. It had been the hardest thing to force himself out of that warm bed, with Belinda Leonard sleeping on his shoulder, blonde hair tangled under her arm, and her burrowing into his arms like a kitten. She was lovely in sleep – she was lovely awake, but it was different somehow. All her walls, her artifice, her exacting nature was stripped away, and she was soft and peaceful. Watching her made his heart want to burst.

Then, of course, her brow furrowed in sleep as she discovered her hair was caught, ruthlessly moved his arm, freed her hair, and settled back down again, having things exactly as she liked. And he woke her up with his laughing.

Now they followed the path in the woods he had been certain didn’t actually exist (but of course it did), kept their hoods up and their eyes wary as they walked through the small stretch of Hemshawe’s Main Street before turning up the shady lane that lead to Croftburr.

He was deciding the best way to get her into the house, when she squeezed his hand, and smiled. “I’ll be fine. There’s an entrance from the west garden. No one will be in that part of the house yet.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“When have you ever known me to not have a well-formed plan?”

He laughed, and pressed his lips to her hair. “I need to ask you something,” he said.

“Oh,” her eyebrow rose. “And I think my uncle would expect you to call on him as well.”

“I expect he would. But I need to go home and get something first.”

“All right.”

“But I’ll be back,” he said, kissing her hand.

“And I’ll be here,” she replied.

* * *

She watched him walk away. Watched him disappear into the morning mist, his dark head of hair bobbing as he practically skipped his way down the path, and she bit her lip to hide her smile. Last night had been an awakening. A madness had come over her, and she’d reveled in it. And now... now she needed sleep.

Because, she thought giddily, as she snuck into entrance from the west garden, that afternoon she was going to accept a call from Adam Sturridge, and he was going to ask her a question.

Except, he didn’t.

Because when Belinda awoke in the late morning, it was to the news that Adam Sturridge’s carriage had passed through town early that morning on it’s way north, Adam on his horse beside it.

Chapter Eleven

Five days.

It had been five days since Belinda had seen Adam disappearing into the morning fog, and five days since she had determined to not care. Since he obviously didn't care, it seemed silly to be the only person in the situation giving a damn.

He didn't care that she had told him she loved him.

That she had trusted him with her body.

That she was willing – eager, even – to let go of her fears and become something new. With him.

But it seemed he only cared about going back to not-Scotland and his sheep, and leaving her here feeling the fool.

In fairness, Belinda had to hand it to Adam. It was the simplest and yet most elaborate possible way to have tricked her. All he had to do was pretend to believe it when Georgie and Francesca began their schemes, and then play along while she agonized over every look, and touch, and word. Indeed, he had played his part so well, she didn't at first believe he could have left.

"He's gone?" she asked Francesca that afternoon.

Her uncle told her about the carriage rolling through town in the morning. But she hadn't believed he rode with it. No, it must have been his valet, or his groom. But when Adam did not make an appearance by luncheon, a pit of worry began to grow in her stomach. Enough that it had her eschewing the traditional lady-like passivity, and she marched over to Sturridge Manor to see just what on earth was going on.

"Yes, this morning," Francesca had said, surprised at Belinda's surprise. "His plans did not change from yesterday. Although, I had hoped..."

Francesca caught her eye, and Belinda looked to her toes. "When

did he leave?"

"Just after breakfast. Little Johnny cried his eyes out, although I don't know if that was because he would miss seeing his uncle for another year or if he was just hungry. I cannot wait until the boy can talk."

Belinda didn't listen much after that. She endured another fifteen minutes of the visit before rising and excusing herself. Not because she was disappointed or numb with shock, but because she had far too much to do.

She had reorganized the kitchens of Croftburr in a completely unsatisfactory way last week, the entire system needed to be overhauled. And then the linens and the candles should be catalogued. She hadn't read any of the academic pamphlets she subscribed to yet this month. And she needed to re-plan the gardens for Croftburr, annuals would never do. Perennials, that's what she wanted. Something that wouldn't change.

Once she was done restoring order to Croftburr, she had the town to think of. And specifically, the Hemshawe Fair, followed by the Harvest Festival.

She had given up weeks to Georgie's party. She had dallied with the Fair while trying to distract herself after the crocus incident, but now... now she truly was behind. She had to organize with all the town's shops and vendors. She had to negotiate a peace treaty between the vicar and several livestock farmers. And she had to determine the exact placement of the stage and center table with the fruit display, so she could commission its construction.

Which was what she was she was doing, when five days after he left, Adam Sturridge rode back into town.

She was standing in the middle of Hemshawe, flanked by Francesca and Georgie, trying to explain her vision.

"And then the fruit display will go right here..." she said, throwing her arms wide in the general direction of the village square.

"Isn't the fruit going to be on a table?" Francesca asked.

"Not anymore. The fruit is now going to *be* the table," Belinda replied with relish. "I was struck by inspiration last night."

Francesca and Georgie looked at each other. "Belinda... the Hemshawe Fair is months away, correct?"

"It's getting closer by the minute."

"True, but perhaps we could give the idea some time to develop." Georgie said. "Or, undevelop as the case may be."

Belinda simply sighed, and blew her hair out of her eyes. "I suppose we can worry about that tomorrow. For now... oh good, Vicar! I was so hoping to talk to you about the animal stalls..."

The vicar, who had been walking with her uncle, stopped and started to walk the other way. That would not do.

"Uncle! Vicar, a moment please!" she darted out into the lane, heedless of the sound of galloping coming round the corner.

"Belinda, wait!"

One second she was crossing the lane, the next she found herself sitting in mud, and facing the rearing front quarters of Adam Sturridge's horse.

"Bel – Bel!" she heard him cry as he dismounted, and came to her side. "My god, I didn't see you. Are you hurt?"

"No," she said, refusing his help in rising, although her rear was quite sore. "I am very well. No thanks to you."

"Bel, I am so sorry. Sir Henry, should I call for the doctor?" he turned to her uncle. But before he could answer, Belinda cleared her throat.

"Excuse me. I said I am fine. There need be no consultation on the matter. Now... Francesca, Georgie, shall we continue?"

The two ladies wore matching expressions of complete surprise. "Belinda, your dress..." Francesca tried.

"A little mud never hurt anything." Except clothing. "Now, the cornucopia..."

"What cornucopia? Belinda..." Adam caught up to her then stopped, taking notice of the group around them. "First things first: Francesca, Miss Gage, hello. Excellent to see you again."

"Yes, Adam – John will be quite surprised. Oh, here he is!" John and Bertram Gage approached from the cooperage they had been hiding in, until presumably they saw the almost accident.

“Yes, hello John, Bertram. I’ll explain everything in a moment, but first... Belinda, may I have a word?”

She set her spine straight. “I don’t see why.”

He froze, and then his eyes narrowed. “You don’t see why?”

“Certainly not. You can have nothing to say. In fact, your saying nothing said things quite clearly.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” he asked, bewildered.

“Only that you obviously feared ridicule more than I did – or the past few weeks have been a very long joke to play.”

“What is going on?” John whispered to his wife, and was promptly shushed.

“Regardless of your intentions, your leaving simply clarified mine,” she replied. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have a festival to plan.”

She tried to walk away, but he stepped in front of her, blocking her path. “No, Belinda.”

“Excuse me, I do have –”

“Bel, we are not doing this again,” Adam sighed. For the first time she noticed that he was sweaty and dirty from almost head to foot. “We lost fifteen years to our own bullheadedness, and we are not going to let it rule us now. I have been riding for almost five days straight – so tell me what is wrong.”

She looked up at him, tears stinging at her eyes. “You said you’d be back.”

“Yes. And I am.”

“No – you said you had to go home and get something and then you’d be back immediately!” she cried. She knew she was standing in the middle of Hemshawe. Knew that there were people all around her, and more gathering. But for all the world, it was as if she and Adam were alone in the woods searching for flowers in the snow.

“Yes, and you seem to have forgotten that I don’t live in Hemshawe. I live up north.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Oh...”

“And I did come back immediately – or as immediately as I could. I think I should get some credit for driving all the way to Scotland and

back in five days.”

“It’s not Scotland,” she whispered.

“It’s basically Scotland,” he replied, a ghost of a smile crossing his face. “I was not going to propose marriage to you without this.”

He reached into his cloak pocket and pulled out a very old handkerchief tied up with ribbon. “It was my mother’s. I had to get it because I knew you would want things to be perfect.”

It was a ring. She was certain it was beautiful but at that moment she couldn’t see it very clearly. Her heart was beating too fast, her eyes had become too shiny with tears.

He was standing in front of her, dirty and red faced. Three minutes ago she hated him. Two minutes ago he almost accidentally killed her. And now he held out a glittering ring while the entire village of Hemshawe watched.

And strangely, it was perfect.

“Adam... this isn’t really how it’s done,” she sniffled, glancing about them.

He looked around at the crowd that encircled them.

“Well, let’s get the ridicule out of the way then, shall we?” he asked, then turned to the crowd. “Does anyone have anything to say about the fact that I wish to marry Miss Leonard? Any comments? Jokes? Now’s your chance. Speak now or forever hold your peace, as the saying goes.”

Not a peep from the crowd. Then, from the back, someone grumbled, “it’s about time.”

Belinda caught Francesca’s eye. Her oldest friend was grinning like a loon. Georgie Gage was leaning on her brother’s shoulder, delighted. Then, Belinda turned to her uncle.

“Well, young man,” Sir Henry said, clearing his throat. “I might have something to say about your lack of following of protocol.”

“Right,” Adam replied. “Sir, I do hope you give permission for me to court and subsequently marry your niece.”

“I think at this point I had better,” her uncle said, earning laughter from the crowd.

“Excellent. Belinda, it’s your turn.” Adam turned back to her, took

her hand. “Come now. I have a whole estate for you to run up north. An entirely new place to ruthlessly organize to your liking.”

“Oh, so you wish to marry me for my organizational capabilities?”

“Well I thought —”

“Or perhaps my knowledge of sheep shearing methods?”

“Belinda —”

“Or is it the —”

“Belinda...” he kissed her silent, stunning the crowd. When he finally let her go, it was to whoops and cheers from all of Hemshawe. His smile matched her own. “Stop arguing and say yes.”

The End

Thank you so much for reading *A Madness in Spring*. I hope you enjoyed it.

Would you like to know when my next book is available? You can sign up for my [newsletter](#) on my [website](#). Or follow me on [Twitter](#), or like my [Facebook page](#).

Reviews help other readers find books. I appreciate all reviews, whether positive or negative.

A Madness in Spring originally appeared in the anthology *A Gentleman for All Seasons*. The other novellas in the anthology are *The Summer of Wine and Scandal* by Shana Galen, *Those Autumn Nights* by Theresa Romain, and *The Season for Loving* by Vanessa Kelly. All of the novellas are available individually or in the full anthology.

If you would like to read an excerpt from my upcoming novella *Miss Goodhue Lives for a Night*, just turn the page!

**An excerpt from *Miss Goodhue Lives for a Night*, coming
September 2016!**

The little town of Helmsley was known for three things. First, its market days, which attracted merchants and visitors from all across the county of Lincolnshire. Second, its windmill, which stood tall and proud at the entrance to the town, grinding grain into the very best flour to be sold on said market days.

And finally, it was known for the miller, Mr. Turner, who just last year had stolen the bride of their most esteemed citizen, Sir Bartholomew Babcock. Mr. Turner had married the Countess of Churzy with a minimum of scandal and outrage, since everyone—most especially Sir Barty—declared the miller and the countess absolutely perfect for each other. But this is not that story.

“Something terrible has happened!”

Alarmed, Miss Cecilia Goodhue looked up from collecting slates. The schoolroom had been still since Friday, when the children had their last day before the spring planting season, but only now did Cecilia have the wherewithal to begin her ritualistic cleaning. She always got a little wobbly when her students went away—even if it was only for six weeks to help their families with the farms. Granted, most of her students would do little with their education, but to Cecilia’s mind, they deserved the chance of it. However, she had barely rolled up her sleeves when her sister burst into the little schoolhouse and made her dramatic declaration.

And Imogene was not the sister given to excessive dramatics.

“What is it?” Cecilia asked, dropping the slates as her heart began to flutter in a terribly irresponsible pattern. The slates cracking as they hit the floor did little to help the fluttering.

“It is the most dreadful thing to have happened to this family since . . . well, you know.”

Cecilia went pale with alarm. “It cannot be as bad as that.”

“Yes, it can, for it is exactly that—oh Cecilia . . . our cousin Eleanor has run off!”

Cecilia nearly toppled over. “Oh heavens. Oh heavens,” she said,

pressing her hands to her chest. "Are you quite sure? Could she have been abducted?"

"Oh, if only we were so lucky!" Imogene reached forward and shoved the letter into her sister's hands.

Cecilia glanced at it, but only saw the messiness of the handwriting. Then, with more resolve than she felt, she folded it and took Imogene's cold hand.

"Imogene, I cannot read this without my glasses, so let me fetch them and then we will discuss. And how can it possibly be discussed without tea?"

The kitchen in the vicarage was cozy, warm from the stove on this early spring day. Imogene, ever the economist, avoided lighting fires if she could help it, so during the winter months, she usually spent her waking hours in the kitchen corner, a small table and a comfortable chair set up just for her. Of course, Cook said this in no way inconvenienced her, but the number of times Cecilia had heard cleared throats and seen dark looks that her sister clearly missed made her a little worried about precisely what was in their meals throughout the winter.

Imogene's husband, Vicar Spilsby, was not an economist, and so he spent the time in his study not annoying his servants. And while Cecilia lived with her sister and brother-in-law, as the schoolteacher she spent most of her time in the schoolhouse that adjoined the church, and so was usually exempt from Cook's glares. But today she was willing to chance it, as she met Imogene in the kitchen once her glasses had been retrieved, and her sister asked Cook for a tea tray and then for privacy.

"Surely," Cook said. "Privacy is a nice thing, ain't it? To be able to be alone with your thoughts as you work, not constantly worried about someone hovering behind you."

"Yes, precisely," Imogene said, her eyes shining gratefully. "I knew you would understand. Now, go please."

"Right," Cook said, taking her apron off and heading for the back door. "I'll just go shiver outside for as long as you require."

"Yes," Imogene said, taking a deep draw of her tea as the back

door slammed. "This is much better. Much more civilized to discuss the end of the . . . the world!" She burst into tears as she finished her sentence, completely marring her usual calm, collected demeanor.

"Sister," please take ahold of yourself!" Cecilia cried, feeling her nose sting with unfallen tears. "If you cry I am going to, because you have always been the steadier of us!"

"Yes," sniffed Imogene. "Yes, you are right. I was simply remembering what happened to you all those years ago, and how difficult it was."

Cecilia felt the hook of guilt that tugged at her belly every time she thought of the past, and how she had brought shame to her family and nearly ruined herself. But that would not be the case today. Not if she could help it.

"Let us look at this letter again with clear eyes—and spectacles."

Cecilia fished the wire frames out of her pocket, perching them on the end of her nose. She scanned the letter in silence, and then read it again, making sure she missed nothing.

"It is from Uncle Robert," Imogene said, narrating as Cecilia tried to concentrate on what she was reading. "He says that a regiment had lately come to Manchester, and that Eleanor fancied herself in love with one of the gentlemen—although she refused to tell her mother which one. Once the regiment moved on, her mother thought the fancy would pass. But then Eleanor disappeared, and she found letters from the young man—whom I would not consider a gentleman, as he never presented himself to the family."

"Yes, your opinion of the young man's perfidy is noted," Cecilia murmured as she read on.

The letters said the young man had transferred to a position in London. And that he would have enough money for Eleanor to join him. Eleanor took off in the middle of the night. She had been traced as far as a posting inn on the outskirts of London, but there the trail ran cold, because a young man in a uniform had collected the girl, and they disappeared into the city.

"She is with him, somewhere in London, and lost to her parents. Lost to us all!" Imogene ended on a wail. "Uncle had to go back to

Manchester.”

“It’s a wonder he could look for her at all with his condition,” Cecilia said. Their uncle had been confined to a wheeled chair since a riding accident had destroyed the use of his legs five years back. But he had kept his good cheer, according to their aunt’s letters to Imogene. Kept it, until Eleanor.

“It’s a wonder he managed to trace her as far as he did,” Imogene agreed. “He can only hope that Eleanor’s scandal does not touch any of her younger siblings, or impact his law practice, but you know it must. They shall bear the weight of the shame forever.”

“What?” Cecilia cried. “They have given up? But they cannot!”

“They cannot afford to pay off the young man—assuming they can find him. And they have no family in London to apply to for help. Indeed, Uncle is the only male relation left in our family. Eleanor is well and truly ruined.”

“No, I will not accept that,” she said, defiant. “Why, imagine what would have happened if Father had not come after me?”

It was not something that she and her sister often discussed. But it was always there, the very reason Cecilia found herself a spinster and living off of her sister’s husband’s grace. And that reason was Mr. Theodore Hudson.

When Cecilia had been sixteen, she had been fanciful. She was still rather fanciful now, but then she had been a dreamer. And she easily imagined herself in love with the dashing boy of twenty. He was down from school for the summer, visiting their neighbors the Lockwoods. He was nephew to Sir Lockwood, and the handsomest thing Cecilia had ever seen in real life—she had once seen a traveling company of actors playing *Romeo and Juliet* and thought Mercutio the most beautiful person she had ever seen. Until Theo.

He’d reminded her of Mercutio, actually—sullen and defiant and funny and brilliant and making her feel things she had never even imagined. He was tragic, and she was romantic, and together they dimmed the stars.

They’d made plans to run off to Gretna Green—knowing Sir Lockwood would never allow his nephew to tie himself to such a

young girl, one with a decent dowry but no name to speak of, whose family ran a law firm in Manchester.

They made it as far as a posting inn that first night before both her father and Sir Lockwood caught up to them. They'd posed as husband and wife as they signed the inn's ledger, so they were naturally given one room. One bed.

And that was how her father found her. Moments from making the biggest mistake of her life.

They'd been separated. Her father had taken her into an empty room, Sir Lockwood presumably stealing Theo into another one.

"He doesn't want you, my girl," her father had said as she clutched the sheet around herself, shaking. "He wants your money."

"My . . . my money?" she had asked, her face falling. "But I don't have a large dowry."

"It's large enough to tempt a man with not a penny in his pocket. A second son. And he was under the impression it was larger. Sir Lockwood was all for letting you go on to Gretna until I told him you had naught but enough for a meager subsistence. Then he was on his horse and riding straight for this inn." Her father narrowed his eyes. "Almost as if he knew his nephew's plans."

"No . . . no, that's not true," Cecilia had said shaking her head. "I'll ask Theo and . . . and then you'll know the truth!"

But her father had only to glance out the window. "By all means," he said. "Ask him. If you think he'll stop for you."

She ran to the window heedless of the sheet dropping to the floor, of her wearing only her underclothes in front of her father. There, she saw the top of Theo's head, his golden hair shining in the moonlight, as he ducked into Sir Lockwood's carriage.

"Theo!" she called out. "Theo!" But from three stories above he surely could not hear her.

"*Theo!*" She gave herself over to a full voice, her body reverberating with the cry. And then . . . she saw it. He paused. Foot on the carriage step, he froze. Then . . . he climbed inside.

She stood there, white as the sheet that puddled on the floor, watching as he pulled out of the inn yard with all possible haste.

Later she would be thankful. Later, after the tears and the pain, and having moved to Helmsley to live with her sister and away from her own ignominy, she would realize that if her father had never come to save her, everything would be very different.

On more fanciful days, she thought that had her life not taken this quiet turn into the town of Helmsley, she would now be married, with multiple children, and desperately poor.

On other days, she was more realistic and knew she would not be married at all.

“No. I refuse to believe that no one in the family is willing to go after Eleanor.”

“I thought about applying to my dear Spilsby,” Imogene admitted, “but . . .”

“Yes,” Cecilia agreed. “But.”

Vicar Spilsby was a good man. He preached forgiveness from behind his pulpit and his bright orange mustache every week without fail. He was comfortably kind to his wife, and in extension, opened his home up to her sister when she fell into disgrace. And he never mentioned it. No, not once. Certainly not when he told Cecilia she should be grateful for the food she had on her plate and to maybe not ask for seconds. And not when he said his wife should be endlessly in obedience because she was able to walk through Helmsley with her head held high and no one knowing of her sister’s scandalous past. Nor when he said that Cecilia should thank God and more important himself for the purpose she had found in her otherwise thrown-away life, by teaching in the vicarage school.

If he were called upon to act as savior to his wife’s family again, there was no end to what the man would refrain from mentioning.

“I will go.”

“What?” Imogene’s head whipped up. “You?”

“Yes, me.” Cecilia could hardly believe she had said it, but now that she had, it made all the sense in the world. “School is out for the spring planting season. I can go to London without interrupting anyone’s studies.”

“Yes, but . . . how?”

“I have some money,” she replied. As she had never married, Cecilia inherited what would have been her dowry when she came of age, five years ago. In fact, it was enough for her to live on if she wished to live independently. But she had never touched it. It felt tainted, like blood money—a prize when all she deserved was penance. However, if any cause justified its use, it was finding Eleanor. “Although I will have to draw on the bank to use it, and I’d have to go to London to do that anyway . . .”

“Then that is the excuse we will give Spilsby!” Imogene cried. “You have to go to London to speak with the bank about your funds. Perhaps you are thinking of setting up your own establishment now that our little family is finally increasing.” Imogene’s hand went automatically to her slightly swollen stomach that had appeared in recent weeks. “No one will question or object to that. Oh! And Mrs. Emory’s old rooms on the square are for sale . . .”

“Yes, yes, that will do for an excuse,” Cecilia said before Imogene’s tangent took on a life of its own.

“But oh—you will need a chaperon.”

“Please.” She snorted. “I am six and twenty. I have already learned the hardest lesson that a young lady can learn. I do not require a chaperon.”

“You don’t know a soul in London. Spilsby may very well insist on accompanying you.”

“I’ll leave that to you,” Cecilia rose to her feet and moved to grab her shawl off the hook by the kitchen door. She felt her boldness growing. “And as to not knowing a soul in London . . . well, I may not know a soul, but we know someone who does.”

“Where are you going?” Imogene said.

“To meet with a countess,” Cecilia replied, and swept out the door.

Read the rest of *Miss Goodhue Lives for a Night* in September 2016!

Now available for pre-order at: [Amazon](#)

About Kate Noble

Kate Noble is the national bestselling, RITA-nominated author of historical romances, including the acclaimed Blue Raven series and the Winner Takes All series. Her books have earned her numerous accolades, including comparisons to Jane Austen, which just makes her giddy.

In her other life as [Kate Rorick](#), she is an Emmy-award winning writer of television and web series, having written for NBC, FOX, and TNT, as well as the international hit YouTube series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Kate lives in Los Angeles with her husband and son, and is hard at work on her next book.

Other Books by Kate Noble

The Blue Raven Series

Revealed
The Summer of You
Follow My Lead
If I Fall
Let It Be Me

Winner Takes All Series

The Game and the Governess
The Lie and the Lady
Miss Goodhue Lives for a Night (e-novella, coming Sept. 2016)
The Dare and the Doctor (coming Nov. 2016)

Other Works

Compromised
The Dress of the Season (e-novella)
A Gentleman for All Seasons (anthology)
A Grosvenor Square Christmas (short story holiday anthology)